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ABSTRACT

Media, particularly in the form of broadcast television, has revolutionized an individual's relationship to culture and cultural practices. This anthology examines the complex set of relationships between art forms, popular cultural practices (including watching television), technology, and audiences. Focus is upon visual arts and artists, and particularly on painting/photography, sculpture, and architecture. Essays include: (1) "Echoes and Reflections: The Representation of Representations" (Philip Hayward); (2) "Representing Art or Reproducing Culture?--Tradition and Innovation in British Television's Coverage of the Arts, 1950-87 (John Wyver); (3) "Postmodernism, Television, and the Visual Arts--A Critical Consideration of the 'State of the Art'" (John Roberts); (4) "All That is Solid Melts on the Air--Art, Video, Representation, and Postmodernity" (Steven Bode); (5) "Artists Mythologies, and Media Genius, Madness, and Art History" (Griselda Pollock); (6) "The Architect as Ubermensch" (Julian Petley); (7) "The Childish, the Insane, and the Ugly--Modern Art in Popular Films and Fiction of the Forties" (Diane Waldman); (8) "Critical Contradictions--Media Representations of 'The Dinner Party' as 'Feminist Art'" (Marie Gillespie; Sylvia Hines); (9) "Art and Images of Women--An Interview with Gina Newson" (Sylvia Paskin); (10) "Screening Photography" (Andrea Rehberg); (11) "Gardens of Speculation--Landscape in 'The Draughtsman's Contract'" (Simon Watney). Notes on the contributors, a filmography index, and an index conclude the work. (MM)

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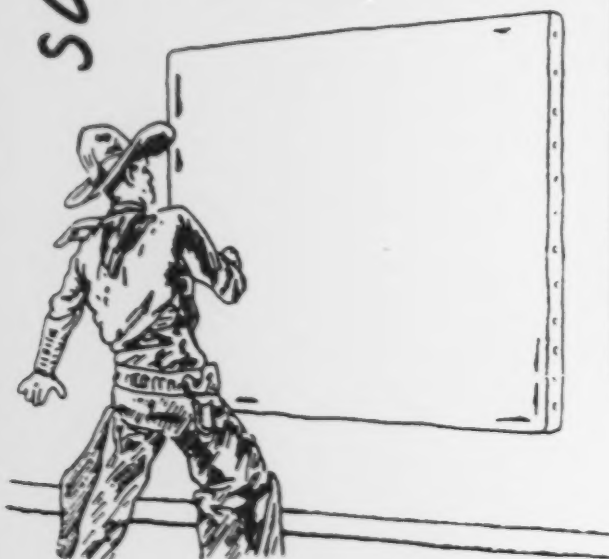
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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
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MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS of VISUAL ART & ARTISTS
Edited by Philip Hayward



IT WAS TOM'S FIRST BRUSH
WITH MODERNISM



PICTURE THIS:

Dedicated to Roy and Ruth Hayward

PICTURE THIS:



IT WAS TOM'S FIRST BRUSH
WITH MODERNISM

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Preface

Media, particularly in the form of broadcast television, has revolutionized our relationship to culture and cultural practices. More people receive their understanding of culture and the arts through television than through visits to opera houses, theatres or art galleries. It follows that one way of appreciating the social and critical importance of the arts is to study the major means by which they are mediated.

Picture This therefore examines the complex set of relationships between art forms, popular cultural practices (including watching TV), technology and audiences. It aims to stimulate that debate and extend it into a *history* of how the arts have been represented by film and television, thus placing firmly back on the critical agenda a discussion that has been subsumed and subordinated by other theoretical concerns.

For 20 years the Arts Council has been supporting documentaries on the arts. Over 150 films have been produced by independent companies that have been influential upon arts programming on television. The importance of this work was a key element in the establishment of a new Council department of Film, Video and Broadcasting, and a new Council policy aiming to play an effective role in providing access to the arts and disseminating information and experience in the broadest multi-cultural sense. Work in both the formal and non-formal education sectors is a fundamental concern. The Arts Council's recent policy statement on the Arts and Education recognizes the role of media education as one method of developing critical skills. Incorporating these criteria, the department's education work revolves around the relationship between film, TV, video and the arts.

At present, this work centres on producing teaching and INSET programmes, drawing on the Council's Film and Video Library resource of approximately 350 in-house, broadcast-originated and independently produced films and videos on the arts. We hope to extend this work by commissioning *Picture This*, and other critical works in future.

This book is aimed at teachers of art, media educators and students. It is not our intention that the book be used as a teaching pack, but rather to provide a conceptual and

thematic framework that can be easily adapted into teaching programmes or used for private study and research. In this volume we are concentrating principally on visual arts and artists; that is painting/photography, sculpture and architecture. This is not to imply that issues around representations of dance, performance, or theatre are of less interest. Significantly different emphases arise from discussion of these practices, which we will be addressing in future projects. We are also aware that the whole area of race, ethnicity and media representation needs critical attention, and we hope to devote a publication to these issues in the near future.

We would like to take the opportunity of thanking Philip Hayward who edited this anthology and the publisher John Libbey who joined with us in its production. We hope that this will be the first of many associations with them and are grateful for the untiring and thoughtful way in which they have approached the task.

Finally, let me state that the views expressed herein are those of the authors and not statements of Arts Council policy or intent.

Will Bell
Film Education Services Officer
April 1988

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1. Introduction

ECHOES AND REFLECTIONS: THE REPRESENTATION OF REPRESENTATIONS

PHILIP HAYWARD

Representation mingles with what it represents, to the point where one speaks as one writes, one thinks as if the represented were nothing more than the shadow or reflection of the representer. A dangerous promiscuity and a nefarious complicity between the reflection and the reflected which lets itself be seduced narcissistically. In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable. There are things like reflecting pools, and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring. There is no longer a simple origin. For what is reflected is split in itself and not only as an addition to itself of its own image.

Jacques Derrida¹

Derrida's remarks on the complexities of representation, though written with specific regard to literary discourse, serve as a fitting introduction to a collection of essays addressed to processes of re-representation. The focus of this anthology is on how the cinema, television and video, henceforth collectively referred to as 'the media', and (to a lesser extent) the parallel discourses of popular literary fiction, press reviews and published criticism, have sought to represent the visual arts and architecture and those involved in its production. Analysis of these areas necessarily involves a consideration of the complex set of issues raised by the representation, interpretation and criticism of one representational medium (ie visual art) by another (ie the media). The field of media representation of visual art therefore offers us a particularly rich site to observe a whole set of critical preconceptions and debates interacting with each other in an often unconscious process, the analysis of whose discourses reveals deep seated cultural presumptions about the 'essence', 'function' and appeal of

(visual) art itself.

Recognition of the often unconscious interaction of specific cultural, critical, art historical and representational discourses within such an area of media practice is however neither to imply that its practitioners are unconscious of the existence of major debates and critical differences, nor that they are necessarily assuming any representational *transparency* for their work; but rather to acknowledge the selectivity, interpretation and (literal) transformation necessarily taking place within any specific signifying practice addressing itself to aspects of another. But while the majority of media practitioners and critics would be unlikely to deny the separation of their practice from their apparent subject, many critics and practitioners are still wont to claim some degree of penetrative insight into an assumed 'essence' and/or essential condition of their apparent subject (and this is as true of many of those critics and practitioners influenced by various aspects of marxist, feminist, semiotic or psychoanalytic theory as it is to those working within more traditional paradigms). These assumptions, often expressed in phraseology such as 'getting to the heart of matters', assume that firstly there is an objective 'essence' to be grasped and secondly that a subjective empathy and/or complementary analysis can somehow 'override' or at least *suppress* both the specific signifying systems of the media used and obscure and/or elide the complex ideology behind the apparently empathic recognition or 'complementary' critical reading.

The project of this anthology is therefore the analysis of the critical address and methodology of a series (and series of styles and genres) of media representations of visual art, not simply in themselves (somehow isolated from the subject of their representation) but in addition to their own analytic and representational relation to their referential subjects; building a further stage onto the representational relationship (a further 'reflecting pool'). This not only takes us further from any notional creative essence or origin of the original artwork(s) but also produces a system of discourse which on its own reveals the nature, differences and different inflections of the critical positions of its authors, aspects of those institutional locations from which they have emerged (and aspects of the broad projects of those journals from which certain of the anthology's essays have been reprinted — ie *Screen*, *Undercut* and *Wide Angle*); a loose pattern of discourses which (as presented here) are, of course, just as illuminatingly open to a critical deconstruction on their own terms.

Much of the early writing around the representation of Art and artists on film concentrated on the issues discussed in the preceding paragraph, of how the filmic medium could best represent the work of art and/or the artist's 'vision' with the greatest degree of representational *fidelity* or at the very least complementarity. Arguments around these themes were of course orientated in various ways and focused on a number of different concerns (detailed below). An illuminating series of early debates took place in the early 1950s in the pages of the British journal *Sight and Sound* at a time when a whole series of other debates about the cultural legitimacy of (popular) film as a medium were beginning in France and were to soon cross over into anglophone film culture, where their prominence was to largely marginalize (if not obliterate) the small but significant debates about Fine Art and film which took place in the early 1950s.

There were various aspects to this. With regard to painting, a prime consideration was the use of film technology to make the pictures transcend both their filmic and televisual representation (and often the supposed 'representational limitations' of their own medium) and somehow 'come to life'. Critics such as Francis Koval singled out the work of pioneering documentary makers such as Luciano Emmer for the way they utilized film technology to effectively extend the pictorial into the filmic (and thereby give the viewer a privileged point of entry into the painting's pictorial space):

Those who have seen his art films such as Il Paradiso Perduto (from the paintings by Bosch) or Damma di Cristo (from Giotto's frescoes) are impressed by the vivid expressiveness of the paintings as seen by the apparently ubiquitous eye of the camera. Elaborate camera movement and dramatic editing make the figures seem almost three dimensional, and despite the black-and-white photography the human eye and its guiding mind enjoy the illusion of colour and movement (my emphases).²

Though this approach was developed in a more dramatic interpretative manner in later films such as Alain Resnais *Guernica*, the somewhat basic and inflexible nature of the style pioneered by Emmer and Enrico Gras, proved however to be somewhat short-lived in critical acclaim, since by 1955 Lotte Eisner was writing in *Sight and Sound* that,

...the possibilities of treating a picture like a scene in a studio without the element of the third dimension - has now become stale with imitation and abuse.³

But as important as technology in the minds of early critics was the personal critical perception and appreciation of the artist by the film maker, an approach which necessitated an intuitively sympathetic reading rather than a critical distance. Eisner singled out Margot Benacerraf's direction of *The Painter Reveron* arguing that 'no film maker has so deeply *penetrated* the work of an artist in a film'⁴ (my emphasis) and praising her for knowing 'how to *see*, she has an innate sense of rhythm and montage'⁵; and Lauro Venturi proposing a whole category of 'films on art' typified by 'their close adherence to the original canvas and to the *inner spirit and meaning* of both the paintings and the painter'⁶ (my emphases). Naturally enough these comments and the many others like it mirror their critical ascription by needing no other justification or argument than the similar recognition by the critic themselves.

1. Margot Benacerraf's *The Painter Reveron* — singled out by Lotte Eisner for its penetrative vision.

Attempts to produce work premised on just such emphatic interpretation do of course persist in contemporary media practice, most notably in that school of art film



production where directors have attempted filmic recreations of the apparent visual environment(s) suggested by the mis-en-scene of particular painters' or photographers' work (for example Derek Jarman's recent (self-explanatory) *Carravagio* or Steven Dwoskin's Bill Brandt inspired *Shadows from Light*); but also (more obliquely) within mainstream fiction film production where cinematographers and directors have often attempted to recreate the visual and/or lighting styles of particular painters (with varying degrees of success) — note for example the influence of Edward Hopper's paintings in the visual design of John Byrum's *Heart Beat* or the self-consciously referential lighting compositions used in films such as Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven*.

Along with this attempt to isolate 'good practice', much of the (albeit limited) critical debate about Art films in Britain and North America involved critics in a somewhat complex situation regarding the vocabulary of Art and Film. Much of the early critical work on film as a medium had concentrated on arguing it as (potentially) valid as an art form in its own right, with the result that by the 1950s the work of certain directors such as Flaherty and Eisenstein was regarded (in film circles at least) as art. The vocabulary of the 'art film', the 'film on art' and 'film as art' was therefore somewhat confusing and pointed out a complex interlinking of hierarchical cultural values and assumptions about the representational function of media.

The significance of this terminological confusion was signposted by Lauro Venturi in an interesting piece in *The Quarterly of Film, Radio and TV* in 1953⁷ where he attempted to unpick the confusion over the terminology 'art-films' and 'films on art' by setting out four categories of film which qualified for the status of art in different ways:

(a) 'Films for which works of art are made expressly'⁸ — such as the animated films made by artists such as Oscar Fischinger or Norman McLaren.

(b) 'Films which deal primarily or exclusively with the narrative contents of one or more already existing works of art'⁹ — such as the work of Luciano Emmer.

(c) 'Films which deal with the historical, critical or technical aspects of art and artists'¹⁰ — skills-instructional films and artists biographies, filmed lectures on art and critical essays on art.

(d) 'Films in which the works of art are pretexts for

something else'¹¹ — films which use works of art as the visual material for narratives or critical theses which do not concern themselves *primarily* with the works of art concerned or issues concerning art (NB Venturi includes Resnais' *Guernica* in this category).

Venturi's purpose in drawing up such precise guidelines was not simply academic pedantry but rather reflects a scrupulous desire to eradicate confusion as to degrees of 'art' (a term whose own definition is of course never specified) which remains (to Venturi at least) a crucial ('high') cultural paradigm. Venturi's earnest desire to create a binding system of classification reflects the potential danger he (and others) saw in the slippage of categories caused by a profusion of various styles of film production which bypassed the conventional art critical gatekeepers of academe and publishing:

*Once a definition of contents is reached, the recent avalanche of art films and films on art can be channelled and analysed with some hope of classification.'*¹²

While the opening section of his piece acknowledges the validity of considering certain films as 'art' in their own right — 'film art'¹³; the whole thrust of his classification perpetuates a hierarchical differentiation of fine art and film practice. This and similar debates signify both the partial success of the first generation of film critics in asserting certain films as art in their own right while maintaining the established status of traditional art forms with reference to a shifted (though tightly guarded) classificatory distinction (ie 'film art' as opposed to 'fine art'). It should however be noted that the occasional work of French critics which appeared in English during this period both expressly denied the need for rigid delineations of type (Jean Queval, 'At present, there is little to be gained from introducing rigid categories into a genre which is still searching for principles...'¹⁴) and (reflecting the development of more sophisticated schools of film criticism in France) even on occasion singled out films for praise which did not attempt to efface their media specificity in representing their subject, but rather *prioritized* it; a practice which 'will sacrifice none of the cinema's own powers, and thus prefers on occasion to let the painting suffer'¹⁵. Such foreign emphases did not however secure widespread acceptance in anglophone critical culture during this period.

The last two decades have seen significant shifts in the emphases of both actual arts documentary production and critical writing addressed to it. Since the early Sixties, film and television producers have largely abandoned attempts to enhance pre-constituted artworks with the aid of media technology in favour of a move towards giving a more detailed picture of the artist, their personal situation and the significance of their work in a broader context. In terms of criticism, writers have largely abandoned such early pre-occupations as the desire to rigidly categorize the nature of representational styles of media practice and, influenced by Walter Benjamin's seminal essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'¹⁶ (or perhaps more precisely, by its influence on John Berger's own highly influential *Ways of Seeing* book and TV series¹⁷); have turned to acknowledging the inherent problems, limitations and transformations affected by the process of *re*-presentation from one media to another. But if criticism has shifted away from a pre-occupation with the mystery of creativity, much media practice has still retained the fascination with the *actual moment* of creative expression which also marked much Fifties writing and production.

Somewhat surprisingly, given the marked critical impact of Benjamin's work on British critical culture in the late Sixties (as cited above); much of the Fifties debate on filmic representations of art explicitly parallels several of Benjamin's main contentions about the process of reproduction. In particular much of the critical work in *Sight and Sound* recognized the necessary depreciation of 'the quality of the presence of the actual artwork' (that quality referred to by Benjamin as its 'aura'¹⁸) when reproduced, and premised itself upon the compensatory recognition of how the representational technology of film and photography can enhance our natural human perception with the use of close ups, new perspective shots, etc (qualities which in turn define the uniqueness of these representative media forms as forms in themselves). It was of course, recognition of the latter which resulted in critical praise for the work of directors such as Emmer in the 1950s¹⁹.

During the Sixties and Seventies a number of media producers (and critics) concentrated on identifying a uniquely privileged area of operation for the film maker which both acknowledged the presence of the film maker at one brief stage in the life of the artwork²⁰ and turned this into the key aspect of the media text by privileging the

moment of creation of the artwork as the most significant stage of its existence. In working in this area, film and television producers were continuing an approach which drew particularly marked critical praise during the first phase of writing in the Fifties, when a number of key critical pieces used remarkably intense prose descriptions to describe the supposed 'mystery' and 'wonder' of artistic creativity (Eisner on Benacerraf's *The Painter Reveron*, 'We are shown the immediacy of the moment of creation, taken alive: an astounding presence is revealed, stripped naked in all its complexity'²¹, or as communicated with a more traditional English (and male) reserve by Patrick Hayman on Lowry, 'The magic of this mysterious occupation comes across in a splendidly satisfying way, as the painting itself grows and changes under the joyful brush of the artist'²²).

This extreme 'fetishization' of the *actual moment* of creation has resulted in the production of a number of film texts which, in attempting to record this moment in as direct a manner as possible, have merely served to highlight the shortcomings and contradictions of both

2. *The actual moment of creation — as represented by Robert Day in The Rebel.*



their specific projects and the broad approach in general. This is particularly true of a number of films addressing themselves to Abstract Expressionist painting. In Hans Namuth and Paul Falkenberg's *Jackson Pollock* for example, the film makers endeavoured to both catch Pollock in the 'act of creation' and produce a precise record of his technique by having the artist simulate his painting style on a sheet of horizontal glass below which was mounted a film camera. The exercise proved so trying to Pollock however that he rapidly abandoned the simulation declaring himself 'out of touch' with his work. Jan Vrijman's film of Karel Appel (*The Reality of Karel Appel*) is, if anything, even more removed from any representation of actual painterly technique and observed creativity; featuring the artist flicking paint at a glass screen (substituting for a canvas) in a frenzy of apparent creativity (accompanied by Dizzy Gillespie on the soundtrack...). Both films principally emphasize the inevitability of attempts to simulate the process and technique of painting (etc), being necessarily only representations of that simulation. Both go beyond the mere insertion of a camera behind the shoulder of the working artist (where at least some semblance of the creative process can be recorded) and produce a false instance where the artist ends up either not being able to simulate her or his work (as is the case with Pollock) or by effectively adapting the work into a performance for camera (in the case of Appel); both instances being at substantial removes from the original notional projects of the films.

While little recent film and television work has attempted to represent visual artists in the actual moment of creation²³; other approaches have still attempted to capture other aspects of the live experience of art at the moment of its creation and thus the moment of its viewer's initial appraisal. Perhaps the most blatant (and in many ways bizarre) of these have come in the form of the BBC's mini-series *Painting With Light*²⁴, a series of six programmes which took six contemporary artists and had them compose a series of video images (so called 'video paintings') with the aid of the electronic Quantel Paintbox (with which they had had little or no previous experience) and a technician — the process of image production appearing directly on the screen. Aside from the (understandably) highly *preliminary* nature of the visual work so produced, the exercise says a lot about the low self-esteem of the medium that complete novices at a complex form of new media technology were invited to experiment with it with the results being broadcast on national TV. Could one

for instance imagine a reverse situation where a group of cinematographers were helped to create their first ever oil paintings, the results of which were then packaged and promoted as exemplary practice in a major touring exhibition? Probably not. The significant difference is of course relative cultural status. In Europe at least, television (and particularly in the British context the BBC), still possesses a marked cultural inferiority complex with regard to traditional 'fine art' media (and even cinema), the result of which is its constant quest for status-by-association with the traditional 'fine art' media: hence the use of celebrity artists for the *Painting With Light* series.

The use of established (fine) artists to bring cache to the medium is of course something of an international phenomenon. At 1987's major European symposium '*The Art of Television*' (held in September 1987 at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum) for instance, Christine van Assche, (video curator at the Pompidou Centre), chose as a prime example of French TV's (supposedly) innovative approach to art, a brief animated collage made by the 80-year-old Surrealist painter Matta²⁵ which was every bit as *preliminary* as any of the BBC's *Painting With Light* series and had seemingly no address to the specificity of TV as anything other than a medium for basic stop-motion work.

The irony of involving traditional fine artists such as painters with the medium of television is of course that in changing the context of their work (from the easel to the screen), the very specific qualities of their traditional practice which are coveted by the media (their precise composition and the *aura* of the original) are of course dispensed with. At the very moment of their transmission and reception (not to mention playback after time-shift recording), images such as those original Quantel Paint-box compositions generated by the artists are subject to myriad individual transformations (which go far beyond those transformational effects noted by Benjamin with regard to *mechanical* processes of reproduction²⁶). Aside from their initial video tape recording, encoding and transmission, the result of their being translated into visual images on a variety of different models of TV set (with different screen sizes and individual technical peculiarities) and on different individual sets themselves (with their range of personally determined colour, brightness and contrast settings and/or specific faults), not to mention the possibility of their being watched in black and white; is to render any of the artist's decisions about *precise* colour composition, intensity, luminescence etc largely irrelevant. Any *aura* the original video image may

have had is immediately dissipated in the instant of its first post-compositional recording and in Derrida's phrase, the 'original' image is inevitably 'split in itself'²⁷ at the moment of its subsequent electronic reproduction.

The rationale behind these attempts to capture the moment and process of creation on the screen resides in the notion of the artist as exceptional individual, the cult of the isolated (and often 'tortured') genius (an approach which as Andrea Rehberg emphasizes is just as firmly rooted within current thinking around photography as it is within perceptions of more traditional fine arts media²⁸). This approach to the artist through (usually) *his* work is of course not only a feature of documentary material, but is also present in the welter of popular fictional work on the topic. As Griselda Pollock's seminal article 'Artists Mythologies and Media Genius, Madness and Art History'²⁹ maps out, popular Hollywood cinema has found the stereotype of the 'tortured artist' a highly attractive subject for representation. There is after all, much in the myth of the inspired individual artist working (often in the face of considerable adversity) to transcend everyday reality and produce a cultural artefact (which then mysteriously assumes the status of 'art'), which recalls the intensity of saintly religious conviction or the nobility underlying classic tragedy.

The 'tortured artist' myth also offers a number of other attractions to film makers. The representation of the *auteur* figure of the artist and the subsequent homage to creative intentionality, often seems to suggest some degree of cross-identification between the film maker and their subject: an identification with an idealized vision of the creative *auteur* forging great works of art under near intolerable social pressures, cultural and economic philistinism and lack of support. It is surely no accident that Michael Cimino initially approached United Artists to remake King Vidor's *The Fountainhead* (which as Julian Petley's essay 'The Architect as Übermensch'³⁰ points out is virtually a celebration of individual totalitarianism) before settling on the idea of a film about the Minnesota feuds (*Heaven's Gate*) and similarly no accident that Derek Jarman should toil so fervently to raise funds to make his impressionistic eponymous biography of Carravaggio nor that the figure and occupation of the draughtsman in Peter Greenaway's *The Draughtsman's Contract*, should so closely parallel that of the film maker³¹.

The theme of individual artistic conviction so intense as to be personally and socially damaging (the underlying motif of both *The Fountainhead* and films such as Alexan-

1. Modernism as a confidence trick foisted on the art establishment by a coalition of pretentious foreigners and devious entrepreneurs — Robert Day's *The Rebel*.

der Korda's *Rembrandt*) also prefigures what is perhaps the cinema's (and indeed popular culture's most enduring representational stereotype — the idea of the mad artist. Griselda Pollock has analysed the biographical myth of Van Gogh as perhaps the epitome of this representation in *Modern Art*³²; but as Diane Waldman's survey of popular films and fiction of the 1940s³³ indicates, the myth is also one which can also be mobilized to *critique* artistic production rather than simply mystify it. As Waldman outlines, a significant trend in popular culture during the 1940s characterized Modernism as a style which principally served to indicate the psychological disorder of its producers, both in itself and in the aberrancy of their rejection of the more conventional and apparently sober pictorial forms privileged by the pre-Modernist tradition (an argument which also has its contemporary art historical incarnation in Peter Fuller's reading of the psychological crises which afflicted those artists such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and David Smith, who were at the forefront of the first generation of Abstract Expressionists³⁴).



The approach outlined by Waldman also has its equivalent in British popular culture, where Modernism is similarly distrusted, but on slightly different grounds, on that of its being essentially a 'con', a confidence trick foisted on the art establishment by a coalition of pretentious foreigners and devious entrepreneurs. In many ways Robert Day's film *The Rebel* exemplifies this particularly enduring perception. *The Rebel* (the story of a singularly untalented (British) no-hoper (played with relish by Tony Hancock) who exiles himself to France, negotiates the irredeemably alien Parisian café society and is eventually acclaimed in error), is significant for its being generally emblematic rather than a specific response to developments in British contemporary art practice. Indeed its scenario is significantly timeless in its address and arguably considerably more appropriate to the Parisian art world of the early Twentieth Century than to the late 1950s. This representation of Modernism as a 'con' has however retained a sense of permanence in British culture, which has not been party to the recuperative and ideologically motivated critical repositioning around Modernism and specifically Abstraction which took place in America in the late Fifties³⁵; resulting in a re-occurring theme in media News coverage of (Modern) art which manifests itself in periodic tabloid scandals about events such as Carl Andre's pile of bricks being purchased and exhibited in the Tate³⁶, or life size submarines being constructed out of car tyres on the South Bank³⁷.

But however understandable such attitudes may be on one level as a corrective to the perceived affectation and excesses of bourgeois culture, they have now become so institutionalized in popular discourses that they operate as indiscriminate cultural clichés whose application is often significantly misguided. As Marie Gillespie and Sylvia Hines' analysis of the British media coverage of the London opening of *Judy Chicago's Dinner Party* outlines³⁸; so strong have the force of these cultural clichés become that even the indisputably skilled artefacts on display were discussed and parodied within the standard dismissive terms of reference in such a supposedly enlightened framework as the ITN Channel Four 7pm News. The ITN Channel Four News item in question³⁹, exemplifying this tendency by privileging (and thereby implicitly colluding with) the opinion of a passing 'man in the street' (who had of course not actually *seen* the exhibition) that it looked like 'a con job' to him.

On one level, media reports such as the ITN News item detailed above simply reflect and exacerbate the con-

tinuing difficulties faced by women trying to establish themselves as artists within traditional fine art practice; but they also evidence a more central aspect of the art establishment's struggle for hegemonic control, the need to police the boundaries of fine art practice in order to repress, exclude or marginalize types of work which aspire to its privileged status (the cultural legitimation which allows for exhibition, discussion and approbation) despite being produced from significantly different traditions of cultural practice. The conceptual differentiation between 'Art' and 'Craft' is a key aspect of this enterprise (and these oppositional paradigms undoubtedly contributed to the art establishment's generally cool reaction to *Judy Chicago's Dinner Party* — relying as it does primarily on ceramics and fabric work). This differentiation does of course have another key strategic function, concerning issues of gender, class and ethnicity; the supposedly less important 'Crafts' traditions usually being those practiced by women, the working classes and/or members of less industrially developed cultures.

It is perhaps one of the more significant aspects of recent critical work and media practice in countries such as Britain and the United States that many of these formerly marginalized crafts practices are now being

4/5 The Pottery Ladies (right) and Käthe Kollwitz (left) — two films attempting to re-evaluate the history of women in arts and crafts.



opened up for re-evaluation. Though much of this work is at an early stage and often retains a fine art paradigm which rests somewhat uneasily with the non-fine art focus of its work; studies such as Rozsika Parker's *The Subversive Stitch*⁴⁰ and documentaries such as Jenny Wilkes' *The Pottery Ladies* series have begun a significant critical reconsideration of their subjects. Hand in hand with this has of course been the critical reassertion of women as producers within the established fine art medium; a tendency signalled in Britain by the publication of Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker's *Old Mistresses*⁴¹ and furthered by curatorial policies which have seen a gradual increase in the exhibition of female artists' work, the production of a growing number of documentaries highlighting the achievements of Twentieth Century female artists (eg Käthe Kollwitz, *Slade Women*, *Lives of Artists not Wives of Artists*, *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti* etc) and the continuing work of directors such as Gina Newson who (in programmes such as *Imaginary Women*) have attempted to address some of the more complex issues around art, society and female creativity⁴².

Art produced within non-Western and/or pre-industrial societies has also been subject to a similar marginalization to that of women's work. Cultural artefacts from these societies have traditionally been approached from one of two perspectives; as either anthropological and/or archaeological artefacts or else (within the history of Modernism), as 'primitive' forms of art possessing stylistic aspects capable of being developed in a supposedly more sophisticated manner by Western fine artists (a tendency especially prominent in early Western European Modernist painting, where a succession of 'primitive' styles such as Japanese Art, Breton peasant Art, African masks and Islamic design etc influenced the painting styles of artists such as Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse etc). Though in recent years there have been attempts to approach non-Western art and cultural artefacts produced by black people within Western society in different, supposedly more 'enlightened' fashions; these have however still tended to follow two broadly similar paths, either concentrating on the ethnic significance of the work as its prime distinguishing characteristic (seeing it as primarily representative of a supposedly socially organic form of culture — presumably contrasted to the more reified and self-referential tendencies of Western fine art practice) or more recently have been concerned with attempts to affiliate particular contemporary black artists to the Western fine art tradition.

The almost complete absence of black artists within the Western fine art tradition to date (an absence no doubt compounded by the continuing *invisibility* of those who have had a significant presence), has somewhat inevitably resulted in the absence of their representation in the Western media (and it is in this context that the final episode of *State of the Art* — entitled 'Identity, Culture and Power', is, aside from anything else, tellingly significant for simply *representing* the opinions and work of a range of black artists). Whereas black musicians or black popular cultural events such as Carnival have been frequently covered in the broadcast media, black artists have been rarely featured within (British and European) television (let alone the cinema) other than in specifically black programme slots such as *Ebony* or *Asian Eye*.

The growing tendency to affiliate selected contemporary black artists within Western fine art traditions has usually involved a dual process of both critical recognition (and effective recontextualization) and often intervention into the actual circumstances and material means of production of the artist's work itself, a wholesale (literal) *re-location* of their practice from one situation to another. As the final episode of *State of the Art* shows, with reference to artists such as the Australian Papunya painters (who were introduced to acrylic painting on canvas by a white teacher as a way of channelling their creative energies into a more permanent form than the body and rock painting they had previously been involved in) and New York artist Jean-Michel Basquiat (who was encouraged to work on the more easily marketable media of canvas and board after being discovered as a graffiti artist); the process of re-location of their work also *dis-locates* it. But as the programme similarly shows, there are a variety of responses to this. For Basquiat at least, the (New York) art market appears to exist as a system open to exploitation with little apparent personal compromise, whereas for Papunya artists such as Michael Nelson Tjakamarra, the very critical and commercial initiatives which have brought them public attention have also diminished the significance of their work.

If however black artists have been overwhelmingly excluded from the Western fine art tradition as producers, there is still the possibility of partially reclaiming the ideological grounds for their exclusion through examining the represented presence of black people in the artefacts of Western culture itself. Alongside their depiction as standard elements in Western genre painting (as for example the three kings in depictions of the Nativity

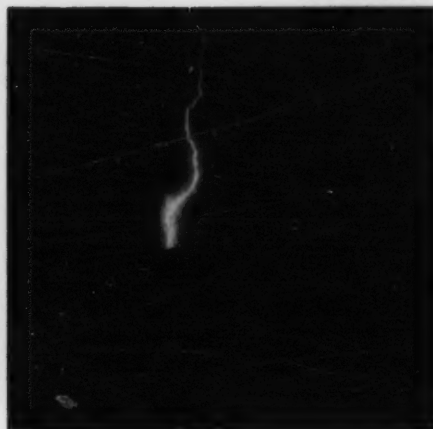
legend); their supposedly peripheral presence in the canvases and prints of particular periods such as the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century offers, as David Dabydeen's television documentary *Art of Darkness*⁴² clearly demonstrates, an area of significant analysis for an understanding of the construction of 'blackness' as a Western cultural 'Other'. This tradition of representation and its discourse still clearly persists in all manner of contemporary representations, in art, photography, cinema, television and the broad cultural field; and therefore needs to be the subject of continuing contemporary analysis as well as art historical scrutiny.

Representation, postmodernism and contemporary media practice

Over the last decade a growing number of critics have both identified a series of distinct stylistic developments in Western Culture and diagnosed them as indicative of a major cultural shift affected by the latest stage of international monopoly capitalism. In anglophone culture at least, these developments have been generally characterized as 'Postmodern'. Many of the stylistic developments associated with Postmodern culture are increasingly visible within both media production and visual arts practice and are consequently significant for any consideration of



6/7. Claes Oldenburg's Clothes Peg (left) and Lightning Field (right) — the swansong of Modernism?



contemporary developments in the media's representation of the arts. The scope of this introductory essay does not however permit any sustained exposition of the general principals of Postmodernism nor an analysis of its full range of implications for contemporary media practice; and therefore confines itself to a discussion of aspects of the critical debates around Postmodernism most specifically relevant to the concerns of this anthology⁴⁴.

As Wyver, Roberts and Bode variously signal in their contributions to this volume⁴⁵; several of the new stylistic modes associated with Postmodernism (and particularly that of *bricolage*⁴⁶) appear to offer media producers alternative ways of both constructing representation and formulating critical discourse. At the same time there is though, as Roberts and Bode also argue, a risk of these same approaches undermining their deliberate referential address by virtue of their de-centred structure (and/or discourse) and a corollary danger of their textual *surfaces* coming to signify primarily *as themselves* rather than *as representation*. In addition to the above there is of course the problem of producing *any* form of representation within a cultural order increasingly marked by the production of styles and images which routinely incorporate and/or pastiche their immediate antecedents as a matter of course (seeking no critical reading or re-contextualization but rather simple effect on its own terms). As Bode's piece outlines, the blank parody of pastiche often fails to provide even a skeletal discourse about its overt subject of representation, breaking down into a superficial play of surfaces and movements drained of any significance aside from that of style in itself (Joan Jonas' accompanying video for Paul Simon's *Rene and Georgette Magritte* being a case in point). In a culture marked by this approach, there is obviously also a problem of readings. If audiences are principally attuned to the simple fascination of the glittering free slide of signifiers, then simply borrowing this approach and transferring it to documentary runs the problem of being read against the grain (or rather on the surface).

Despite the qualifications noted above, the potential offered by analytical *bricolage* is that of constructing a form of text and textual address that interrogates its subject in a variety of ways using different modes of address and/or forms of material; and which does not attempt unified or necessarily *coherent* theses, but rather emphasises both the diversity, tensions and contradictions of the referential text(s) and those very aspects of its own form and analysis. By melding both classic modernist

strategies and critical approaches developed from post-structuralism, analytic *bricolage* has the potential to produce analyses similar to those produced by Derrida within literary discourse⁴⁷ whereby texts are interrogated and inter-penetrated by a critical discourse which opens up the structural contradictions (*aporias*) upon which their textual formations are premised. This is obviously a highly ambitious project and one which is just as surely prone to the excesses of its literary precedents; but its stylistic developments do offer the tantalizing possibility of developing new textual styles (and/or textual *strategies*) which both transcend the blankness of pastiche and go beyond recuperative attempts to re-invigorate established documentary conventions by adopting superficial elements of *bricolage*. They offer the potential of producing what may be termed 'deconstructive' readings which, by virtue of their formulation within a more familiar and thereby readily accessible media language, are available to a potentially more general public than the overwhelmingly reified work produced by literary deconstructionist critics. Of the small number of media texts which have begun to explore this area it is perhaps Triple Vision's remarkable *Prisoners* which has so far most convincingly illustrated the potential of the approach. *Prisoners* demonstrates how styles of consciously analytical media *bricolage* can employ the incorporation, fragmentation and contextualization of a key referent (in this case Ridley Scott's pastiche Orwellian 1984 Apple computer commercial) and produce a text and textual strategy which transcends its formal precedents⁴⁸ and as Bode discusses⁴⁹, moves towards a deconstructive reading (in the Derridean sense).

As noted above, there is of course nothing innately deconstructive about the broad style of analytical *bricolage*, but rather a possibility of its functioning in this manner — a possibility not so readily available (if available at all) to conventional representational forms. Similarly there is nothing innately 'progressive' about more conventionally formulated forms of documentary representation which employ aspects of *bricolage* (and/or also hark back to previous forms of more open variagated documentary address⁵¹). The *bricolage* of multiple texts taken from and/or representative of a variety of discourses does on one hand offer the potential for arguments and analyses to develop out of the viewer's own (active) reading of different viewpoints (both convergent and divergent) and may of course come up with readings supplementary or antithetical to the original intentions of

the programme makers; but also risks a general confusion. The fact that such approaches can be observed to have worked well within individual media texts (such as Kevin Rafferty and Jayne Loader's *Atomic Cafe*) is due to their very effectivity being premised on a 'preferred'⁵¹ and thereby predictable reading. *Atomic Cafe* for instance relies on its contrast of pro-Nuclear propaganda (much of it vintage and therefore quaintly archaic) with the pre-constituted convictions and knowledge of its target audience — those sympathetic to the anti-Nuclear lobby (a classic case of preaching to the converted), which thereby gives it a 'guaranteed' extra-textual 'voice' which substitutes for the seemingly absent commentary of the text.

In attempting to develop representational styles which require viewers to construct meaning out of a complex set of differently articulated discourses there is though the danger of all voice retreating from material, rendering it an aimless jumble of impressions and sources whose interactions merely produce an apparent 'meaning effect' at an immediate superficial level. As John Roberts points out in his essay 'Postmodernism, Television and the Visual Arts':

*The use of a systematic intertextual aesthetic as the basis for documentary work therefore has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it clearly offers an advance in the complexity and texture of argument over the profile of the lecture, but given the tendency of anti-narrative structures to weaken causality, it can also reduce ideas to a heterogeneous soup*⁵².

Despite the claims of some critics and practitioners, postmodern representational styles cannot then in any sense be seen as marking an advanced stage in any sort of evolutionary progress of representational forms and discourses towards ideally comprehensive or incisive modes of address or analysis; but rather mark one aspect of a complex set of shifting textual strategies determined by and reacting to changes in broader cultural patterns. In contemporary Western society, with the proliferation of forms of media and media discourse and the increasing commodification of culture with its consequent rampant inter-textuality and pastiche; the originating sources (or 'wellsprings') of creativity are increasingly more obscure and it is increasingly misleading to assume any essential (let alone 'transparent') relation between a representational media text and its referent.

Discussion of the implications and effect of Postmodernism as a cultural phenomenon is also apposite for an

aspect of the inter-relation of Art and media which lies outside the scope of this anthology; that of how the visual styles of media and specifically film (themselves influenced by Fine Art, design and architectural traditions) have fed back into the realm of Fine Art, design and architectural practice itself. There are of course myriad subtleties and resonances to the eternal re-reflection and play of influences between the visual styles of film, television and video and the various styles of visual representation which occupy the same contemporary moment; but though there have been many arguments asserting the influential nature of certain styles of filmic images on individual painters⁵³ this tendency is perhaps no where so marked as in Morris Lapidus' Miami Beach hotel architecture, where, as Beverly Heisner has detailed⁵⁴, the design styles of film set designers such as Carl Jules Weyl (Busby Berkeley's collaborator at Warner Brothers) and the RKO designers Van Nest Polglase⁵⁵ and Carroll Clark proved formative influences on Lapidus' design for the public spaces in such ornate hotels as Miami's Fontainebleau and Eden Roc.

Lapidus' work on these buildings drew upon predominantly *illusory* filmic spaces to create real architectural spaces that embodied aspects of the dynamic qualities of those fictional filmic spaces created through set design, camerawork, lighting and editing (not to mention the additionally affective aspects of choreography and music) in the classic Hollywood musicals of the Thirties. Interestingly, there is much in this approach which prefigures the more *general* approach to the design of public spaces represented by architects working within the aesthetics of the Postmodern movement in architecture (which was the first discipline to use the term as a designation of an actual school of practice). Lapidus' remark that:

*Busby Berkeley, more than anyone else had caught that kind of elegance and glamour that everyone yearned for. He created a dream world... If they had a group of dancers, they somehow were in spaces that were not the kind of spaces that people were accustomed to. They were curving, sweeping, undulating spaces... I decided to use these movie techniques*⁵⁶

prefiguring the sort of concerns and striving for effect that Fredric Jameson noted in a more advanced form in the architecture of John Portman's Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles⁵⁷, where, Jameson asserts, the new architectural spaces on offer are as different from the spaces of traditional modernist architecture 'as the velocities of

space craft are to those of the automobile⁵⁸; producing new and often disorientating spaces which are significantly different from those people are 'accustomed to' and which their inhabitants *necessarily* experience in a different way.

The specific example of the influence of Hollywood set design on the architectural practice of Morris Lapidus detailed above gives us at least a partial indication of the degree of influence exerted by popular American Cinema during its heyday in the 1930s (prior to the advent of television). The shift in power and influence towards television over the last four decades has not though simply substituted one media form for another in an analogous fashion. In contemporary Western society, television operates on a different basis and different level of intensity. Whereas the cinema was (at its peak) a venue for leisure (a latterday 'pleasure dome') which privileged individual films as individual texts (and in the case of premieres and certain new releases textual *events*), the nature of the contemporary media order is such that we now have a culture increasingly *saturated* by a proliferating variety of media (the various forms of television (now including cable and satellite), video, computer visual display units etc, not to mention new developments in fields such as holography) whose general output predominates over the individual texts which comprise its 'flow'.

This development of the media, combined with the tendency in advanced monopoly capitalism for all visual art to be increasingly commodified as market product, has resulted in a complementary shift in the relation between the media (and particularly) television and art itself. The respectful distance which typified much media Arts programming during the 1950s-1970s is increasingly disappearing in favour of a more clearly exploitative approach which does not so much seek to *represent* art (or the artist) but rather *transform* it into television. With the substantial proliferation of television programmes about art over the last decade, art is increasingly a practice and product to be utilised by television and presented in a generic manner which is increasingly referential to its own concerns and requirements. Heretical as it might seem to make such a parallel, just as television coverage of sport has produced significant changes in both aspects of games, their rules, public perceptions and the attendance, expectations and behavioural patterns of its followers; so television coverage of the Arts is increasingly both commodifying pre-existent artworks to its own demands, producing models of practice for artists to conform to and

increasingly patronizing those artists (from various fields) astute enough to produce within these emerging tenets. It is clearly observable that in the late 1980s we are beginning to see a new trend in both television Arts coverage and the packaging of Video Art work, where the new material made for programmes such as Channel Four's *Alter Image* series and the Video Art packages *Ghosts in the Machine II* and *Time Code* increasingly seem specifically made to be represented.

Whether this new hybrid of TV Art is seen as a productive and challenging form of contemporary artistic practice or whether it is lamented for its harmful effect on traditional forms and styles of production; it is a form which can only be recognized not countered. In this sense the focus of this anthology may be in the process of becoming increasingly obscure, the province of art historical address, since while pre-constituted art and artists may still be capable of being represented, a significant proportion of future artistic production is likely to be made for its own media representation — a move which quietly shifts us towards that quasi-apocalyptic stage sometimes referred to as 'The End of Representation' and which signals the need for fresh addresses to issues concerning the status and interaction of media specificities in the complex inter-relation of visual art and media practice.

Notes

- 1 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, London, John Hopkins Press, 1976, p 36.
- 2 Francis Koval, 'Interview with Emmer', *Sight and Sound*, vol 19 no 9, January 1951, p 354.
- 3 Lotte Eisner, 'The Painter Reveron', *Sight and Sound*, vol 25 no 2, Autumn 1955, p 105.
- 4 *ibid*, p 106.
- 5 *ibid*.
- 6 Lauro Venturi, 'Films on Art: An attempt at Classification', *Quarterly of Film, Radio and TV*, Summer 1953, p 389.
- 7 *ibid*.
- 8 *ibid*, p 386.
- 9 *ibid*, p 387.
- 10 *ibid*, p 389.
- 11 *ibid*, p 390.
- 12 *ibid*, p 386.
- 13 *ibid*, p 385.
- 14 Jean Queval, 'Film and Fine Arts', *Sight and Sound*, February 1950, p 35.
- 15 René Micha, cited in Gavin Lambert's (untitled) review of *Films on Art: A Specialized Study, an International Catalogue* (Paris, UNESCO, 1949), *Sight and Sound*, March 1950, p 41.
- 16 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in his *Illuminations*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1970.

- 17 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972 and *Ways of Seeing*, a series made for BBC Television in collaboration with Mike Dibb.
- 18 Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.* p 225.
- 19 See discussion in previous section 'Early Critical Debates — The Nineteen Fifties'.
- 20 Since, as Benjamin emphasised, the reproduction of a work of art only conveys one fleeting instant in the life of the artwork, its changing contexts of ownership and exhibition and its actual changing appearance. See Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in his *Illuminations*, *op. cit.*
- 21 Eisner, *op. cit.*
- 22 Patrick Hayman, 'Art films by John Read', *Sight and Sound*, vol 26 no 4, Spring 1957, pp 217-218.
- 25 With the significant exception of the *State of the Art* series which filmed the sculptor Anthony Gormley in the act of producing.
- 24 A series of six programmes broadcast on BBC2 during May-June 1987, featuring Jennifer Bartlett, Richard Hamilton, Howard Hodgkin, David Hockney, Sidney Nolan and Larry Rivers — see Henry Fenwick and David Hockney (interview), 'Paint Box of Tricks' in *Radio Times*, May 2-8, 1987, pp 82-84.
- 25 *Untitled*, Matta, France, 1986 (originally broadcast on Canal Plus).
- 26 Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.*
- 27 Jacques Derrida, *op. cit.*
- 28 see Andrea Rehberg, 'Screening Photography', pp 167-182 (this volume).
- 29 Griselda Pollock, 'Artists Mythologies and Media Genius, Madness and Art History', pp 75-114 (this volume) — reprinted from *Screen*, vol 21 no 3, 1980.
- 30 Julian Petley, 'The Architect as Übermensch' pp 115-126 (this volume).
- 31 See Simon Watney, 'Gardens of Speculation: Landscape in *The Draughtsman's Contract*' pp 185-192 (this volume).
- 32 Griselda Pollock, *op. cit.*
- 33 Diane Waldman, 'The Childish, The Insane and the Ugly — The Representation of Modern Art in Popular Films and Fiction of the Forties', pp 127-150 (this volume) — reprinted from *Wide Angle*, vol 5 no 2, 1982.
- 34 See Peter Fuller, 'Jackson Pollock' in *New Society*, April 26th 1979, reprinted in Peter Fuller *Beyond the Crisis in Art*, London, Writers and Readers, 1980.
- 35 See for instance, Eva Cockcroft, 'Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War', *Artforum*, June 1974; and Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1985.
- 36 On the occasion of the Tate Gallery purchasing Carl Andre's brick sculpture 'Equivalent VIII' in 1976.
- 37 David Mark's 'Polaris', constructed out of 3,500 car tyres, being exhibited on the South Bank in 1985.
- 38 Marie Gillespie and Sylvia Hines, 'Critical Contradictions', pp 151-160 (this volume).
- 39 ITN News item featured on Channel Four 7pm News on March 1st 1985.

- 40 Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, London, Women's Press, 1984.
- 41 Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, *Old Mistresses*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.
- 42 See Sylvia Paskin's interview with Newson, 'Art and Images of Women', pp 161-166 (this volume).
- 43 *Viewpoint '87 — Art of Darkness*, written and presented by David Dabydeen, directed by David Moloney, Central Television, 1987.
- 44 For further discussion of the general concept of Postmodernism see Fredric Jameson 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' in *New Left Review*, no 146, July-August 1984; for further discussion of the relation between Postmodernism and media practice see *Screen*, vol 28 no 2, Spring 1987 (Postmodernism issue).
- 45 John Wyver, 'Representing Art or Reproducing Culture?' pp 27-46 (this volume); John Roberts, 'Postmodernism, Television and the Visual Arts', pp 47-62 (this volume) — reprinted from *Screen*, vol 28 no 2, Spring '87; Steven Bode, 'All that is Solid Melts on the Air', pp 63-74 (this volume).
- 46 A textual style which, in Jameson's phrase 'proceeds by differentiation rather than by unification' — Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *op. cit.* p 75.
- 47 See for instance, Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.
- 48 Such as Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart* (USA, 1937), which reworks sequences from George Melrose's *East of Borneo* (USA, 1931) to produce a form of collage whose effect is similar to that practice Andre Breton termed 'synthetic criticism' (Also see J. Hobermans, 'Joseph Cornell', *American Film*, vol 5 no 4, January-February 1980).
- 49 Steven Bode, *op. cit.*
- 50 See for instance John Wyver's invocation of Humphrey Jennings in his 'Representing Art or Reproducing Culture', *op. cit.*
- 51 In the sense meant in Communications Studies theory, see the definition given in Tim O'Sullivan et al, *Key Concepts in Communication*, London, Methuen, 1985, p 178.
- 52 John Roberts, *op. cit.* p
- 53 See for instance Erika Doss, 'Edward Hopper, Nighthawks and Film Noir', *Postscript*, vol 2 No 2 Winter 1983.
- 54 Beverly Heisner, 'Movie Scenery and Popular Architecture: Morris Lapidus' Miami Beach Hotels', *Postscript*, vol 1 no 1, Fall 1981.
- 55 Who originally trained as an architect himself, working on designs for the presidential palace in Cuba during World War One before joining Famous Players-Lasky in 1919.
- 56 Morris Lapidus, as cited in Beverly Heisner, *op. cit.*
- 57 Fredric Jameson, *op. cit.* pp 80-84.
- 58 *ibid.* p 84.

REPRESENTING ART OR REPRODUCING CULTURE? Tradition and innovation in British television's coverage of the Arts (1950—87)

JOHN WYVER

In the early years of British television, the medium's relationship with 'the arts' was almost exclusively defined by the relay. An overwhelming majority of programmes were (and to a lesser extent still are) live or recorded transmissions of events from a television studio or from an outside broadcast location. The intent is to 'bring the world into the viewer's home'. Consider for example, the early months of 1949 when the BBC was providing a single television service for an hour in the afternoons and then from just 8.30pm to 10.15pm. Searching the schedule for signs of 'the arts' it is evident that Monday evenings frequently offered a prestigious ballet, and a number of concerts and recitals were dotted around the schedule. There were occasional screenings of purchased documentaries about painters, and even less frequent lectures from a television studio about such subjects as *'The Eye of the Artist'*. There were also three major dramas each week, many of them light comedies but with the classics strongly represented. Excluding the purchased films, all of these programmes, whatever their other characteristics, were essentially live transmissions. Such relays (of drama, music, dance, and discussion), are then the foundation stones of television's relationship with the arts (and of its relationship with most other areas of its concern).

The technology today is far more sophisticated, and the use of recordings and editing mean that the approach and coverage can be a good deal more subtle and responsive, but programmes which are essentially relays remain central today. Recent triumphant examples have included a version of Trevor Nunn's intimate and claustrophobic

production of *Macbeth*, Patrice Chereau's production of *The Ring* from Bayreuth and, just as spectacular and involving, the 1985 *Live Aid* broadcast.

Complementing the medium's relays are the three distinctive forms of television *about* the arts, the forms which television has developed to understand and communicate the experience of culture. These forms, which can most conveniently be characterized as the profile, the biography and the lecture, are the central strands to the tradition as it presents itself to contemporary programme makers. Each has been enormously valuable for the discussion and appreciation of the arts, but each has been restricting. For the three forms share certain fundamental features which can offer only a narrow and limited range of understandings of culture. And combined with the dominant assumptions about culture within British thought, they have for all the delights and insights offered, created a tradition which is in significant ways an impoverished one.

The history of the arts profile on British television begins in 1951, when in the first British film documentary made especially for the still nascent medium, John Read directed a study of Henry Moore. Painters and sculptors had appeared on screen before this and Read himself had directed a live broadcast built around photographs of the Elgin Marbles. But the Moore programme was the first full length arts film and may be regarded as the originator of the genre. As might be expected from the son of the eminent critic Herbert Read, this important director's area of interest was, and remains to this day, the visual arts, and through the 1950s he developed and refined the profile with films about the major British artists of the time: Graham Sutherland, Stanley Spencer, John Piper and L.S. Lowry. The fundamental importance of this work is that it initiated British television's *creative interpretation* of the arts.

In 1958 the BBC acknowledged Read's achievement by re-screening all of his films to date. That same year the Corporation started the fortnightly magazine series *Monitor*, edited and presented by the late Huw Wheldon. Within the selection of items in each edition there was frequently a profile, either by Read or by film-makers like Peter Newington who were indebted to Read's work; and numerous programmes today, across all four of Britain's television networks, retain the impress of these early films. The characteristics of this form are now commonplace: a concentration on one figure, who is interviewed and shown in the act of creation. There is a stress on

autobiography and a reliance on introspection; as is suggested by the title of Read's early series *The Artist Speaks*, the interpretation of the work is mainly that offered by the creator. Such films endeavour to approximate on the small screen a sense of the emotional impact of the work — they are concerned above all to communicate the *feeling* of the work, whether this is a poem, a picture, a musical composition or a novel, and in this, the best of them are surprisingly successful.

This concern to reproduce, or at least to approximate, what is thought to be the aesthetic force of a work has been carried over into the closely related forms which have developed from the classical profile of an individual. The most profitable of these has been the process film, where a new drama, opera or dance is followed from rehearsal to reception. Attention is invariably focused on the production's theatrical impact, and is rarely devoted to, say, finding a historical perspective on the work or understanding the financing and investment decisions made by the producers. Obviously the profile form was not an invention of television; it was an important element in journalism and more considered criticism, and of course, in radio. And as is suggested by the title 'Talks Department', where Read made all his early films, radio was a crucial influence on the early years of television in Britain. Aspects of the younger medium were carefully modelled on radio, but it had the wonderful additional capacity of showing an artist at work, and from the beginning Read and others were as quick to exploit this as their initially cumbersome equipment would allow.

John Read recognizes the influences of the British documentary tradition of Grierson (under whom as a junior assistant he began his career) and Flaherty (who just before his death in 1951 had begun work on a film about Picasso's *Guernica*) on his film making. This tradition stressed, in Grierson's words 'the *creative* treatment of actuality'¹ and directors like Paul Rotha and Ralph Bond, as well as Flaherty himself, were very much occupied with the *poetry* of film language. From Grierson too, Read drew a recognition of the importance of narrative; the documentarists of the 1930s having honed the technique of narrative accounts of social processes in films like *Drifters*, *Night Mail* and *Aero Engine*.

Narrative was also a fundamental element in a further group of influential films about painting: a series of Italian documentaries begun in 1940 by Luciano Emmer and Robert Vlad. In Read's words each one was 'a piece of dramatic story telling...from the paintings of Giotto, Car-

paccio, Jan Eyck and Bosch...the visuals were largely details from a number of different paintings by the same artist, rearranged to suit the conventions of narrative¹². These films were the forebears of certain crucial elements in British television's framework for the arts: a focus on the individual (with a complementary stress on autobiography and introspection); a desire to suggest and interpret the emotion and poetry of a work and its creation (with a consequent preference for feeling over analysis) and a reliance on linear narrative.

Monitor, the first regular magazine series about the arts, embraced the profile form with enthusiasm and broadened the range of subjects on whom it was imposed; the writer Shelagh Delaney, impresario Rudolph Bing, actress Katina Paxinou and the composers Gian Carlo Menotti, Peter Maxwell Davies and Dudley Moore, as well as many others. Huw Wheldon's enthusiastic and engaging manner, his brilliance as an editor and his support for the best young film-makers around (Ken Russell, John Schlesinger) quickly established the series within the BBC schedule. At first a fifty minute programme could include Peter Brook considering *musique concrete* with an extract of his production of *The Tempest*, a short film by Schlesinger about a circus, an interview with Kingsley Amis, Joseph Cooper at the piano, a view of Epstein's sculpture and a report on *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (which was in fact the rather indigestible menu for programme one); but soon the series settled down to presenting studio links and two films (and occasionally only a single work) each fortnight. *Monitor's* subsequent influence can hardly be over-estimated. It stimulated and served the growing interest in culture amongst the British middle classes and it coincided with the blossoming of the distinctive post-war voices within the arts in Britain. John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Harold Pinter and others were enriching the theatre, Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson were transforming the cinema and British Pop was set to emerge from art school. *Monitor* responded to these initiatives, mediating the new, and the unfamiliar elements of the old, for an increasingly curious and engaged audience. Inevitably then, *Monitor* set the mould for the arts magazine series, which was soon to be copied by Independent Television (ITV), and which has been more or less successfully emulated ever since.

As a national network of regional companies financed by advertising, ITV had appeared as a second television channel in 1955. Slow initial growth was followed within two years by an unprecedented boom in audiences and

revenue, since the companies were presenting almost exclusively home-grown entertainment and comedy alongside bought-in thrillers and westerns from the United States. The culmination of growing criticism came in 1962 when ITV was rapped over the knuckles by the Government's Pilkington Committee and was instructed to act more responsibly towards the audience. *Tempo* was one response to such feeling and started as a rival to *Monitor* in 1961. Edited at first by Kenneth Tynan, *Tempo* produced a number of distinguished programmes, but despite running until 1968, failed to establish a solid identity or reputation. Since then ITV has developed the form with *Aquarius* (1972-77) and with the highly successful *The South Bank Show*, edited and presented since it began by Melvyn Bragg.

As well as artist's profiles, and a certain amount of straightforward studio based arts journalism, *Monitor* made its own significant contribution to the two other forms of arts programming: the lecture and the dramatized biography. As with the profile, the illustrated lecture remains a resilient form. Like the profile, it too had obvious precedents in radio, but again television was a great improvement in that it could show the work being discussed. (We should however note the intriguing transitional form known as *Radiovision*, where the listener purchased slides of paintings to be discussed on the radio

1. Salvador Dali
confronts the
camera in the
1970's Art
magazine series
Aquarius.



at a later date and viewed or projected these during the broadcast). At first the television lecture was based in the studio to which paintings, reproductions, or in the popular variant known as 'master-classes', music students would be brought for consideration.

Monitor nurtured the lecture form and introduced intellectuals from a less restricted range of disciplines and beliefs, but television lectures reached an apogee with *Civilisation* in 1968. Since then, the 'personal view' documentary blockbuster has become one of the staples of prestige television and has been a major force in arts television. Its distinctive features — a presenter (usually a man) popping up *in situ* around the world, a chronological over-view of the area of knowledge, a glossy spin-off for the coffee-table — are now as familiar as those of its best known personalities. Since Clark gave us *Civilisation*, Bronowski has offered *The Ascent of Man*, Ronald Harwood has covered the theatre in *All the World's a Stage*, Dame Margot Fonteyn has looked at *The Magic of Dance*, Robert Hughes has given us an up-date on the visual arts (*Shock of the New*) and recently John Roberts tracked *The Triumph of the West*.

To a considerable degree *Civilisation* and most of its siblings share the critical approaches of the film profile: a focus on individuals, a stress on feeling (hence the dramatic lighting and expressive camera movement, supplemented by music) and a narrative account (the *story* of Western Civilization from the Dark Ages to the light of Impressionism); but they also depend on a fourth critical element, a positivist conception of knowledge. For Clark and most of his followers, the acquisition of knowledge is dependent on direct *experience* of a place or canvas or a fresco. From this intuition derives the familiar filmic device of showing the narrator in the Pazzi Chapel, on the stage of La Scala, or by the banks of the Avon. Such involvement it is implied, gives him and by extension you the viewer, direct access to a 'truth' about the Renaissance, or Verdi, or Elizabethan Theatre. And so the words of the narrator or lecturer, and (usually) his thesis are validated in the most convincing way possible. Such a style has numerous antecedents, but clearly draws on eighteenth century notions of enlightenment through undertaking 'the Grand Tour' and, later, on the Victorian middle-class version of this in both organized tourism and 'magic lantern' slide shows. At the same time, the employment of empiricism is directly in line with the traditions of education in Britain from the same period onwards.

The intellectual approach was invariably from the

populist ends of academic disciplines. In the visual arts, this meant Kenneth Clark. And with him and his peers came attitudes which blended a stress on the over-riding importance of 'High Art' and its seriousness with broad strokes of elitism. As Lord Clark disingenuously writes of his appearances on ITV in the 1950s and early 1960s:

I stubbornly continued to do programmes on general topics, and some of them were quite amusing. I remember one called 'What is good taste?' in which I had constructed a bad-taste room and a good-taste room. The bad-taste room contained almost everything that was then to be found in the average home, a flight of china birds and a carpet from the Co-op.¹

'Gradually,' he continues, 'it became clear to me that what people wanted was to know about individual artists'.¹⁴ And so the lecture form similarly narrowed its subject matter to reinforce the picture of the visual arts presented by film profiles.

As the use of films became more widespread, the lecture form became more mobile. From May 1966 on BBC2 there was a series of short films called *Canvas*, which featured a critic or artist reflecting on a painting of her or his choice, shot in the gallery or church where the work was hung. Over a decade later *One Hundred Great Paintings* was working with precisely the same idea, and — although quite different in many other respects — as far as form went, so were the Open University 'Modern Art and Modernism' course TV programmes. The thesis of such programmes may be offered as a 'personal view', but it is invariably within the mainstream of thought. Kenneth Clark was invited to make *Civilisation*, not John Berger, who had to be content with a far less lavish riposte three years later in *Ways of Seeing*. Further, knowledge for Kenneth Clark is not only dependent on experience, but is 'natural', a matter simply of visiting enough places. As the press release for *Civilisation* boasted, 'Eleven countries and 117 locations visited. Works in 118 museums and 18 libraries shown'. If you too had gone to all these places, such a claim implies, then you too would have come to precisely the same conclusions as Lord Clark. Knowledge in this system, then, is not problematic. There is little room for complexity and contradiction, and knowledge is certainly not seen as a construction, produced within and according to the tenets of particular political or social or ideological frameworks. Robert Hughes in *Shock of the New* nodded towards an awareness of this understanding, and the Open University's 'Modern Art and Modernism'

course programmes embrace it fully, but only Berger has managed to build it into the basis of a mass-audience series.

As might be expected, the basic attitudes of television in its relationship with the arts are those shared by much of the mainstream of our culture. At heart they are the legacies of nineteenth century Romanticism. The catalogue which follows is tinged with caricature, but only to the extent necessary to reveal as contentious, ideas which are otherwise taken as 'natural' or obvious. Art, for television, is what artists make — a comment not as tautologous as it may first appear. For art on television is above all about people; individuals who are special, skilful, gifted, perhaps inspired. Most of them work on their own, creating, in whatever medium, for the pleasure, edification and enlightenment of us all — as long, that is, as we share a particular sense of ideas and values, which is invariably assumed and rarely made explicit.

2. Art on television is above all about people, individuals who are special, skilful, creative, perhaps inspired....
Glen Barter as pictured in The South Bank Show.



Artists usually have a 'vision' or 'something to say' (at least if they are any good) and individually use their chosen medium to express that. These messages (at least from the best of them) are about ultimate or eternal truths, insights into the human condition. Politics and economics, history, or the specific national or social circumstances of the present, may be important for an artist, but (within traditional fine art practice) he or she is attempting to transcend them, reaching beyond them into something more important.

Who are these people, these artists? Mostly they inhabit the mainstream of our culture, or rather, the particular culture dominated by the Euro-American tradition and given form in Britain by the Sunday reviews, Radio 3, the Arts Council, the Royal Opera and Royal Ballet, major galleries like the Tate and the Hayward and theatre companies such as the RSC (Royal Shakespeare Company) and the National. If they are not generally accepted as part of the cultural pantheon of the past, then they are important because they are treated seriously by the Sunday reviews, Radio 3 and the Arts Council. Broadly they conform to certain patterns, work within identifiable traditions. But beyond the choice of all of them is a notion, an elitist hierarchical notion, of excellence. They are already recognised and television rarely takes a risk in the art and artists with which it deals.

Those favoured are mostly the denizens of an 'official' mainstream culture (one of the less distinguished would-be inheritors of the *Monitor* mantle was actually called *Mainstream*). It is a culture which believes before all else in the morally educative value of art. Television is certain that art is 'Good for You'; a deep seated notion carried over from the Reithian principles on which radio, and later television, were founded. Prior to the establishment in 1927 of the British Broadcasting Corporation, John Reith had been general manager of the British Broadcasting Company, a cartel of radio manufacturers. Secure as the first Director General of the new corporation, Reith underpinned his new organization with a notion of public service which has remained the most potent force in British broadcasting to this day. That this idea was central from the beginning can be seen in the words of the Royal Charter which noted:

...the widespread interest ...which is shown to be taken by Our Peoples in the broadcasting services and of the great value of such services as a means of disseminating information, education and entertainment.¹

There is no doubt that for Reith, informing and educating the public were more urgent tasks than entertaining them, and the BBC interpreted these ideals in a paternalistic framework, strong traces of which remain to this day. Culture, moreover, was to be one of the prime forces in the informing and educating of the people.

An equally significant contribution to the understanding of the arts and culture within British life as a whole, and particularly within British broadcasting, was made by the Cambridge academic F.R. Leavis. Leavis' influence on education has been wide and deep, and rather more contradictory than is often allowed. For this argument it is important to note his sense that serious literature's highest aspiration is to explore life with a moral seriousness and thus to enrich it. The consequent moral education of the reader is his or her only hope of resisting the technological society which is constantly threatening to swamp civilisation. The continuing force of these ideas are clear in this recent credo by John Read (from an interview in the magazine *Antique Collector*):

The basic reasons for (making art programmes) is simply that you've got to stand up for the imaginative world, the imaginative element in the human personality, because I think that's constantly threatened. It's a very materialistic society; it's an increasingly technological society, or economic society; and there are other values — people do have imagination and sensibilities, and I think that does need constant exposition.⁶

It is a Leavisite credo with which almost no one in British arts television would disagree.

It must be recognized that these principles, the programme makers who have worked with them, and the programme forms which they have developed, have jointly created a strong and enduring tradition which has been one of television's most significant contributions to enriching the lives of people in Britain over the past thirty years. It should also be recognized (although it rather more rarely is) that this tradition has been restrictive and exclusive. By and large, any cultural element on the cutting edge of what was once called the avant garde has been consistently ignored. So has cultural experience from outside the Euro-American tradition, despite Britain's slow and painful, yet fundamental development into a multi-racial and multi-cultural society. So too has much cultural experience not immediately recognized as 'art', in craft-based practices, in community work, and in popular culture. At the same time the medium has been stubbornly

unwilling to relax traditional criteria of evaluation and to allow art to create its own world, its own rules, and its own appropriate basis for judgement. And the predominant frameworks have frequently prevented elucidation of historical, social and political context, and have lead television to ignore other approaches which can be constructive in understanding and appreciating cultural experience. So that, for example, television has rarely examined ways in which art is presented, distributed, exhibited and criticized.

Perhaps surprisingly this has not always been the case with some of the most distinguished work in the third dominant television form: the dramatized biography. The key work in this history is a film not about a visual artist, but a musician: Ken Russell's *Elgar*, first shown in 1962. Actors were used to portray a creative individual for the



3. Ken Russell, the innovator of the artist's biography.

first time in an 'arts documentary', but such were the constraints on the form at that time, they were not permitted to speak. The success of the film — which put forward a traditionally Romantic evocation of an artist — was such that Russell was able to develop the form rapidly, and he subsequently made two television films about visual artists: *Always on a Sunday* (the story of Henri Rousseau, co-scripted by Melvyn Bragg, and first screened in 1965) and *Dante's Inferno* (about Rossetti, first screened in 1967). The Rousseau film is a delightful portrait of a 'misunderstood' and neglected artist, but is straightforward and rather one dimensional. *Dante's Inferno* is however far more ambitious and complex, offering ambiguous and occasionally contradictory reactions to the painter. Many of the meanings and ideas on offer are carried in the images and in the juxtapositions. Nonetheless the final effect is a portrait of the artist as a guilt-ridden and tormented genius. Which remains the dominant representation in television drama documentaries, right through to the portrait of Mark Rothko in the BBC's reconstruction of the court-case which followed his suicide (*The Rothko Conspiracy*, first screened in 1985).

In this respect, television was foreshadowed by the commercial cinema (and numerous nineteenth century biographies). Visual artists from Rembrandt (played by Charles Laughton in Korda's eponymous 1936 film) through to Van Gogh (played by Kirk Douglas in *Lust for Life*, 1956) and Michelangelo (played by Charlton Heston in *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, 1965), were presented in this way. Television has offered few challenges to this image, and has retained the focus on an individual and on a strong narrative. Yet some of the medium's most interesting engagements with the visual arts have been in this form. Lesley Megahey's films, for example about Gauguin (1976) and the minor Dutch painter Schalken (1979), both use the technique of reconstructing scenes from canvas on film, but place these sequences within richly suggestive approaches to the artists. In Megahey's film on Gauguin (which avoids any representation of the artist himself), this involves showing the building of the South Sea island sets on the sound stage where the film was shot, so suggesting a parallel between the painter's mythical construction of the lives of noble savages and television's equally mythical construction of the life of the artist. By contrast, *Schalken the Painter* adopts a very different approach. Scripted as a Gothic horror story, with every frame conjuring up seventeenth century Dutch genre paintings, the conjunction of these two sets of conventions

proves not only entertaining but also questions the underlying ideas which we use to approach paintings of this type.

This trilogy of the profile, the lecture and dramatized biography retains its dominance today, as do the organizing principals which each element utilises: narrative, individuals, feeling rather than analysis, and a positivist concept of knowledge. These principals are complemented by a set of assumptions about the value and worth of 'the arts', assumptions which also issue from specific history.

The writing of this article to this point has attempted to retain elements of a neutrally descriptive tone. The intent has not been to be negative or dismissive. For although the representations of the visual arts on television have been highly restricted, many valuable, informative and enlightening programmes have been made. But the traditions have been so strong that they have virtually excluded, or totally marginalized both significant areas of the visual arts and important approaches to them. Such approaches come from 'alternative' critical positions (alternative to television's mainstream that is) and — when they have been realized — have often drawn on different traditions of documentary.

One such alternative tradition could be identified as springing from the work of Humphrey Jennings. Although Jennings (who died in 1951) was close to the group of Grierson inspired sponsored film-makers of the Thirties and Forties, his work has always been seen as distinct. In films like *Listen to Britain* and *Diary for Timothy*, he developed a highly personal, *poetic* style, largely free from commentary and dependent on the juxtaposition of images and, crucially, sounds⁷. His mosaic like films are not narratives, but painstakingly edited sequences of precisely framed shots. In television, and in the area of the visual arts, this style has been explored by director Geoffrey Haydon, whose (eponymous) films include studies of Roy Lichtenstein and Ed Ruscha (both in the BBC's 1979 series *Seven Artists*) and an *Arena* programme on the ruralist David Inshaw. Although centred on single painters, none of these is a conventional profile, and each is more an immaculately crafted meditation with pictures and sounds from locations as varied as a Californian townscape (Ruscha) or the English countryside (Inshaw).

A quite different alternative tradition of film-making was initiated with the analytical investigations *Housing Problems* and *Children at School* in the Thirties. These studies employed location filming, interviews, reconstruc-



*45. Fay Godwin
and Roald Dahl as
represented on The
South Bank Show
— denizens of an
official culture?*



tions and graphics to highlight the social inadequacies of the time. Their influence is now seen in numerous current affairs programmes, but their methods are only occasionally employed in programmes about the visual arts. Holding fast to its preference for feeling over analysis, television rarely looks at the *institutions* of the art world, at the ways painting and sculpture are written about, bought and sold, commissioned and exhibited. There are exceptions: a 1966 documentary *The Art Market* and two excellent films for *Omnibus* in 1977 directed by Julia Cave, titled *For Love or Money*; but few other directors have attempted to scrutinize the circulation of art works with the analytical methods of journalism. And it is also curious to note that two other recent programmes on related subjects, *The Rothko Conspiracy* and Peter Watson's similarly named, elaborately disguised, entry into art crime, *The Caravaggio Conspiracy* (1984) drew heavily on conventions from other genres, the courtroom drama and the detective film.

A third documentary alternative is less cohesive but can be seen to have grown out of a radical investigation of the fundamentals of film and the cinema during the Seventies. This truly independent work is difficult to characterize briefly but could be held to embrace films as different as *Nightcleaners* and *Riddles of the Sphinx* and the structural explorations of Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice, (none of which could be regarded in any way as 'conventional' documentary). Such work is now beginning to be seen on television in Channel Four's *Eleventh Hour* slot and has informed the making of several of the Arts Council's films about the visual arts, including Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey's *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*, James Scott's *Chance, History, Art* and Stephen Dwoskin's *Shadows from Light* about photographer Bill Brandt (which Channel Four screened in a prime time slot).

Alternatives to television's dominant presentation of the visual arts have also been achieved by programme makers working within common forms, but inflecting them with (for television) unexpected critical approaches. Mike Dibb's profile of the painter Robert Natkin made with the collaboration of art critic Peter Fuller (*Somewhere Over the Rainbow*, 1981) remains one of the best examples. Shifting frames of reference (psychoanalysis, fantasy, the painter's relationship with the market) are employed to present a stimulating study of Natkin quite different from what would almost certainly have resulted had he been the subject of a profile on *The South Bank Show*. In a similar way, Gina Newson's film with Marina Warner *The Making*

of *Joan of Arc* (1983), took television's traditional lecture format, but cut across its conventions by attending closely to the relationship between changing representations of the 'Maid of Orleans' and the cultures which had thrown each of them up.

One further influential alternative of the past decade was not nurtured (like many of the above) by Channel Four, but rather by the BBC's *Arena* strand, formerly edited by the Corporation's current controller of BBC 2, Alan Yentob. Since 1978, *Arena* has made a number of exuberant cultural celebrations modelled on Nigel Finch's *My Way*. This parcelled together in a knowing, funny mix, twenty or so film and video versions of the song. The clashes of styles and apparent formlessness created a pattern which *Arena* has developed in *The Private Life of the Ford Cortina*, *It's All True*, *Chelsea Hotel*, *Ligalione* and others. These are all highly structured, even if presented as naive, collages centred around a theme or object, and they often employ music and quirky humour to create enjoyable and popular programmes.

The importance of these programmes lies in the way in which they break with television's usual forms of dealing with the arts and with the medium's dominant form of vision. Considered with an awareness of the tradition sketched above, they can be seen to dispense (by and large) with narrative; they are not centred on individuals nor are they dependent on a positivist conception of knowledge — subjectivity and shifting frames of reference are fundamental to their form. Though their analytical content is minimal, they are also significant for challenging the notion of the relay, the concept of television as a 'window on the world'.

As Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow emphasized in their influential analysis of a 1977 *World in Action* programme (originally published in the journal *Screen*)⁸, the concept of the relay is a key one for television not just as an approach to production (ie the 'actual' live coverage of an event) but also as a 'term of its exploited imaginary, the generalized fantasy' which 'is then taken for the ground reality of television and its programmes'⁹. This 'generalized fantasy' is then part of an ideology (of television) which is self-nourishing and presents itself as unproblematic, even 'natural'; as Heath and Skirrow stress: 'The empirical rule of the dominance of the picture is a rationalization of the ideology of the document, the window on the world'¹⁰.

Though the above-mentioned *Arena* programmes make no challenge to the relay model within each individual

brief segment, their mixing of forms and strategies (including fictional models) is undoubtedly a resistance to the media's dominant form of vision. Martin Jay has suggested that one (perhaps *the*) feature of postmodernism is its challenge to the primacy of vision, and while the value of the label is debatable, it is the parallels with his arguments which prompt consideration of these *Arena* programmes as examples of postmodern television. Moreover, they share certain features of what is regarded as characteristic of postmodernism in the visual arts as a whole, including the appropriation of imagery, the borrowing of the surfaces of historical styles and the breakdown of distinctions between 'High Art' and mass culture.

If it is useful to think of the *Arena* programmes under discussion as postmodern, they should be recognized as exemplars of *symptomatic* postmodernism. That is, while they do offer some challenge to the medium's dominant mode of television, they also share certain features of the television culture as a whole. They could not be seen as examples of what we might call oppositional postmodernism, or in Hal Foster's phrase 'a postmodernism of resistance'¹¹. To understand how a 'postmodernism of resistance' might be created within television, consider first the argument of Raymond Williams.

In his book *Towards 2000*¹², Williams argues that key modernist innovations were originated as responses to the complex effects resulting from the dominant institutions of political and corporate economic power destroying traditional communities and replacing them with newly created concentrations of power (both real and symbolic) in a few metropolitan centres. Williams also notes the paradox that the same processes which controlled and centralized the new means of universal distribution — the cinema and later broadcasting — were at the same time being discovered and developed. Thus Williams says 'the very conditions which had provoked a genuine modernist art became the conditions which steadily homogenized even its startling images, and diluted its deep forms, until they could be made available as a universally distributed 'popular' culture'¹³.

The most significant aspect of Williams' argument is however (for the purposes of this essay), his crucial avoidance of both technological determination and cultural pessimism; put simply, he rejects the idea that advances in cable and satellite television will necessarily bring wall-to-wall *Dallas*, and that this is necessarily a 'Bad Thing'. The real enemies Williams asserts, 'not only of culture but in the widest areas of social, economic and

political life, belong to the dominant capitalist order in its paranational phase.¹¹

How then to offer a resistance to these forces, and in particular to their current cultural manifestations? One idea which influenced the thinking of the writer Sandy Nairne, the producer-director Geoff Dunlop and myself as we were preparing our series of documentaries *State of the Art* was a resistance to the dominant model of television, which, following Benjamin, might be called 'dialectical images', or after Berger, 'a dialogue of images'. Like a previous Channel Four series *About Time* (made by



6. *State of the Art* —
an attempt to
reformulate
television's
approach to the
Arts.

Mike Dibb, Chris Rawlence and John Berger), which used juxtapositions of images and arguments against each other to open up debate rather than affect a precise predetermined closure, *State of the Art* was widely regarded as postmodernist. Leaving aside the questions about the usefulness of this designation, it is not my intention here to respond to the largely negative reaction which the programmes received on their first transmission, since the series is described well in John Robert's essay in this volume¹⁵. The tradition to which it responded is laid out above, it may be left to the individual viewer to decide its relative success or failure.

Notes

- 1 Although this definition is frequently noted, a specific reference in Grierson's own writings has eluded me. In *Grierson on Documentary*, edited by Forsyth Hardy, London, Collins, 1946; Hardy, who was a close colleague of Grierson, writes in his introduction (p. 11); (Documentary) 'derived from *documentaire*, a term applied by the French to their travel films, Grierson used it to describe Robert Flaherty's *Moana*, an account of the South Sea islanders. Later he defined it as 'the creative treatment of actuality'.
- 2 Read in an untitled, unpublished paper delivered at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London on June 11th 1985.
- 3 Kenneth Clark, *The Other Half*, London, John Murray, 1977, pp 207-208.
- 4 *ibid*, p 208.
- 5 Fourth Charter of the British Broadcasting Corporation, July 1952, London, HMSO Cmd. 8605.
- 6 John Read (interview) in *Antique Collector*, November 1982.
- 7 With regard to the extent of Jennings' 'personal authorship' we should however note the arguments advanced by Dai Vaughan for recognition of the crucial role played by his long time editor Stewart McAllister (see Dai Vaughan, *Portrait of an Invisible Man*, London, British Film Institute, 1983).
- 8 Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow, 'Television: A World in Action', *Screen*, vol 18 no 2, Summer 1977.
- 9 *ibid*, p 56.
- 10 *ibid*.
- 11 Hal Foster, 'Postmodernism: A Preface'. In Foster (ed) *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Port Townsend, Bay Area Press, 1983, p xii.
- 12 Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985.
- 13 *ibid*, p 145.
- 14 *ibid*.
- 15 John Roberts, 'Postmodernism, Television and the Visual Arts', pp 47-62 (this volume).

POSTMODERNISM, TELEVISION AND THE VISUAL ARTS

A critical consideration of *State of the Art*

JOHN ROBERTS

The short history of TV's critical representation of the visual arts is a fairly uninspiring one. In fact to talk of a *history* of the critical representation of the visual arts on TV is to validate an area of work that is on the whole *ad hoc* and untheorized. From John Read's profile of Henry Moore in 1951 (incidentally — and ironically — the first full-length BBC feature on any of the arts) to Robert Hughes' pan-national extravaganza, *Shock of the New*, in 1980, the visual arts on TV have suffered perhaps more than any of the others from that familiar mixture of ruling class paternalism and bourgeois ahistoricity. Television has used art either to bolster the Reithian virtues of good taste and disinterested connoisseurship or for the purposes of ridicule. A good example of both these approaches was Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* (1969) whose mandarin historiography and scoutmasterish moralism — culture as a Job Well Done, to paraphrase *Monty Python* — did little to undermine the received image of art as the hot-house product of embattled genius.

There have of course been exceptions to this rule, in particular writer John Berger and director Mike Dibb's *Ways of Seeing*, made in 1972 as a counter-blast to Clark's series, and the Open University's *Modern Art and Modernism* course (1983) produced by Nick Levinson. If *Civilisation* demonstrates the barest grasp of historical and political causality, *Ways of Seeing* and the Open University course make it their *raison d'être*; art is remapped within the discourses of social production. However, both programmes have a tenuous link with contemporary practice; their status as cultural interventions is ostensibly histori-

cal and methodological. Moreover as teaching aids the Open University programmes were made outside the constraints of mainstream broadcasting. Thus, although we can point to both series as dislodging the positivism and cutaneous romanticism of the conventional profile or dramatized biography, their field of reference was retrospective and generally academic. It wasn't until *Shock of the New*, which borrowed the lecture format from *Ways of Seeing*, that an attempt was made at contextualising contemporary art and its diverse trajectories in any large-scale popular sense. However, if Hughes, as a full-time jobbing art critic for *Time Magazine*, avoided the querulous scepticism of TV's in-house presentation of modern art, his swaggering authorial *diktats*, rapid costume changes, and reinforcement of the Story of Art disappointed hopes for a programme on contemporary art that took on social context as more than picturesque backdrop.

Under such an onslaught of mystification and populism it is no surprise that critics and producers in the Eighties should ask some searching questions about the way art is presented on TV. In a recent publication, *Broadcast Television and the Visual Arts* funded by Television South West¹, such questions are raised for the first time in some detail. As Nick Levinson says: 'On television, the history of how and why art exists, as well as why we have certain attitudes towards it, have not been prised apart from the values art has been given by the dominant classes. Although the broadcasting world has largely ignored such questions, they have become central to much art criticism, history and teaching in this country for nearly two decades.'² If Levinson's contribution sets the critical agenda — that there is massive room for improvement in the treatment of the visual arts — contributions from two of the other invited producers, Melvyn Bragg and Nigel Finch, outline just how entrenched the intellectual equivocations of mainstream arts broadcasting continue to be. This is rooted in what might be called the 'transmission problem': 'television itself will never provide the complete answer to the purist painter's problem for the simple reason that looking at a television set is different from looking at a painting' (Bragg)³. 'Art itself on television, is at best ...a tease, an introduction not a substitute for the real thing and the producer's function is to find a way of compensating on television for what has been lost' (Finch)⁴.

Art is a poor or unstable partner of TV because at no point can it be adequately replicated. All art can do is make

polite off-stage noises. Setting aside the post-object media of performance and video and their singular broadcast potentiality (an area in fact that Finch has a certain amount of practical familiarity with), the obvious question is: why should the 'making up' for loss of visual accuracy be a question of *compensation*? In short, little discussion is advanced in Bragg and Finch's contributions to the effect that the inevitable gap between artwork and its reproduction might be a productive *release* for analysis. The assumption that TV has to be a convincing, vivid mediator of the direct encounter between spectator and artwork is simply the product of an unproblematic account of the recovery and production of meaning from art; the intractabilities of reproduction have become red herrings in a much deeper debate over art's relationship to knowledge. What makes art on TV potentially so interesting is its notational value. Which does not mean that works are thereby devalued but that their illustrative status is in a position to serve what television does best: the taking up and talking through of ideas.

It is this deeper debate over art's relationship to the conditions of knowledge post-*Ways of Seeing* and the Open University course that has formed the basis of a series of critical initiatives over the last few years from John Wyver and the Illuminations production company, who have to a great extent been at the centre of the re-theorizing of the art documentary. Like Levinson, Wyver seeks a distance from the 'primacy of vision' model. Unlike Levinson, though, Wyver is a critic of the lecture format, the profile and the dramatized biography. As he argues in his own contribution to *Broadcast Television and The Visual Arts*, all three forms 'share certain fundamental features which can offer only a narrow and limited range of understandings of the visual arts'⁵. These are a focus on the singular presentation of opinion and information and a residual moralism. The words of the expert or critic 'are presented as an unmediated "truth", and only on the rarest of occasions are they challenged or contradicted or undercut'⁶. For Wyver therefore, what art documentaries have conspicuously lacked is not simply an emphasis on 'social context', but a critical acknowledgement that cultural artefacts are the product of competing value-systems. As such, if art documentaries are to be beholden to the complexity of their subject then there must be a materialist commitment to the foregrounding of contradiction. That this has become a commonplace within post-'trivial-realist' film theory does not detract from its novelty and practicality within an area of documentary work

which, as Levinson has said, has dragged palpably behind other areas of film production.

Illuminations' first attempt at what has provisionally been called a postmodernist documentary by Wyver was their critical overview of the New British Sculpture (Woodrow, Cragg *et al.*), *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Sculpture So Different, So Appealing?*⁷ If this was a generally lightweight treatment of the emergence of a much publicized sculptural 'movement' (too insistent with its declamatory atonal soundtrack by David Cunningham on *not* being a conventional documentary), it nonetheless offered a range of strategies and forms that placed the discussion of art outside the closures of the centralizing authorial presence, be it Clark's connoisseur or Berger's intellectual-as-caring-person. A mixture of interviews with artists, their dealers and critics (pro and con), situation shots and studio shots and images of publications, provided an intertextual grounding for the acknowledgement that the meanings of art are multiply authored and reproduced.

It is this distance from the positivism of the conventional profile and the sanctity of the expert's presentation that forms the televisual framework of Illuminations' most ambitious production so far, *State of the Art*⁸. Produced by Wyver, directed by Geoff Dunlop, written by Sandy Nairne, and co-funded by Channel Four and WDR Cologne, this six-part series on contemporary art in Britain, Germany, the USA and Australia in fact offers, in virtue of its resolute displacement of the objective professional art historical voice, a putative paradigm shift for the art documentary.

1. Cultural artefacts are the product of competing value systems....



As Sandy Nairne says in the preface to the book which accompanied the series: 'I proposed that the divisions of the programmes would not be based on national schools, particular styles or chronological change, but on issues current both in art and in society as a whole. Secondly, the films would not be about the lives of the artists, their eating or sleeping habits, nor indeed about artists at all. What we have produced is a discussion of art itself, seen through extensive interviews with them, focusing on the ideas that have helped form their art and circumstances in which it is viewed and interpreted. It was clear that there could be no objective position, that many of my ideas had been formed by what I had read and those I had listened to. Nor could our project be independent from the circulation of ideas and assessments in the artworld.'⁹

But even if such a series vindicates Wyver's Benjaminesque call for a dialectical use of quotation and image in its distance from the profile and dramatized biography, it would be a mistake to assume that *State of the Art* is simply a *reaction* against the weaknesses and omissions of these forms. For *State of the Art* is the direct product of a distinct set of theoretical interests that have burgeoned over the last ten years or so. In short, the series is the product of that critical culture of the image that we now take for granted as cultural studies: the rise of film studies, The New Art History etc, etc. The absence of a central authorial presence is thus not just a formal acknowledgement of the objectifying powers of representation but a *structural* recognition. The space for the intellectual or critic as universal commentator has been eroded in the face of the proliferation of art's contents across many subject positions, ideological fronts and expressive resources. *State of the Art* therefore reflects and participates in the wholly transformed culture of the visual since *Ways of Seeing* in 1972 and the re-theorization of modernism during the late '70s and early '80s. The extensive reorientation of critical agendas in the art schools (the generation of new content spaces outside the 'figurative' and modernist abstraction canons in the wake of the advance and employment of specialist discourses in relation to the 'new media') has broken down the received hierarchies of competence, value and interpretation that Kenneth Clark was reinforcing and Berger reacting against. This is not to say that this 'revolution of means and ends' in the '80s has been completely victorious (Jocelyn Stevens' closure of the Environmental Media department at the Royal College is one of the more widely publicised recent attacks on such gains) or that certain conventional modernist prejudices

still do not hold (in some cases for good reason against the earnestness of the post-auratic) but that the twinned myths of the Great Western Tradition and unmediated expression which allowed modernism to speak for a narrow range of — predominantly white, male, middle-class — interests, are in retreat.

State of the Art's commitment to the work of women artists and artists of non-European origin or background is a clear indication that the relationship between art and its production and history is in the process of being decisively transformed. The false democracy of TV can of course be deceiving (as I will discuss later) but nonetheless it is extraordinarily gratifying to see a number of women artists and black artists not just offering up forms of ghettoized opinion, but participating in an international culture of the image. And if there is a general political point that the series makes then this is it. For in jettisoning the critical machinery of conventional art historiography (biography as the authentic ground of artistic intention, stylistic comparison) the programmes draw out the content of the work in relation to those categories, discourses, *real* tendencies in the real world, that gives the art its place and legibility within the broader culture of ideas as a whole. A familiar approach maybe — even within certain sections of progressive broadcasting — but a wholly new model for the presentation and discussion of the visual arts.

The series is divided into six critical thematics: 'History, the Modern and Postmodern', 'Value, Commodity and Criticism', 'Imagination, Creativity and Work', 'Sexuality, Image and Identity', 'Politics, Intervention and Representation' and 'Identity, Culture and Power'. Each programme employs interview material (direct to camera), spoken quotations (from critics, sociologists, writers, etc), situation shots, contextual 'scene setting', social footage and occasional music.

Working within the orbit of a post-Godardian aesthetic (whose anti-narrative strategies Wyver actually traces back to the early, and fragmented, English modernist documentary tradition)¹⁰ the juxtaposition of quotation and image serves to dynamize the relationship between artworks, events and ideas. However, this is not to say there is lots of fast editing (on the contrary Dunlop, Wyver and Nairne tend to slow the pace down in the interests of scholarly contemplation) but that location shots and quotations continually call the art back to struggles in the real world. Thus if we are to distinguish the series from the basic juxtaposition techniques of the modernist docu-

mentary tradition alluded to (if we can characterize it as a tradition at all), it lies in the *systematic* and *self-conscious* use of quotation and contextual material as a means of showing that art, ideas and the world of objects and events interact and interpenetrate as parts of a single process. In this distinction lies a world of philosophical difference.

Before I address myself to the postmodernist implications and assumptions of this intertextual approach, it is necessary to present a brief synopsis of each programme.

History, the modern and postmodern

The programme opens with a *mélange* of urban noises and languages, in recognition of our global electronic culture as the motive force of capitalist hegemony. 'Everything is being totalized and at the same time atomized' says Leon Golub. The post-war capitalization of communications technology is thus presented as the primary focus for the self-understanding and critical perceptions of artists. Faced with the injuries of modernity and the binding logic of mass culture where do the responsibilities of artists lie? The main body of the programme takes up this question in the response of three European history painters (the Italian neo-classicist Carlo Maria Mariani and the German allegorists Jorg Immendorf and Anselm Keifer) and American installation-artist and dream-collator Jonathon Borofsky, to the post-war Western experience of modernity. The engagement with, and retreat from, modernity in the work of these artists supplies the postmodernist framework of the series: the freeing of the artist from the linear (from modernist evolutionism and technological determinism, hence the redemptive emphasis on *painting history*) and the universal (the myth of the artwork or artist speaking for the whole).

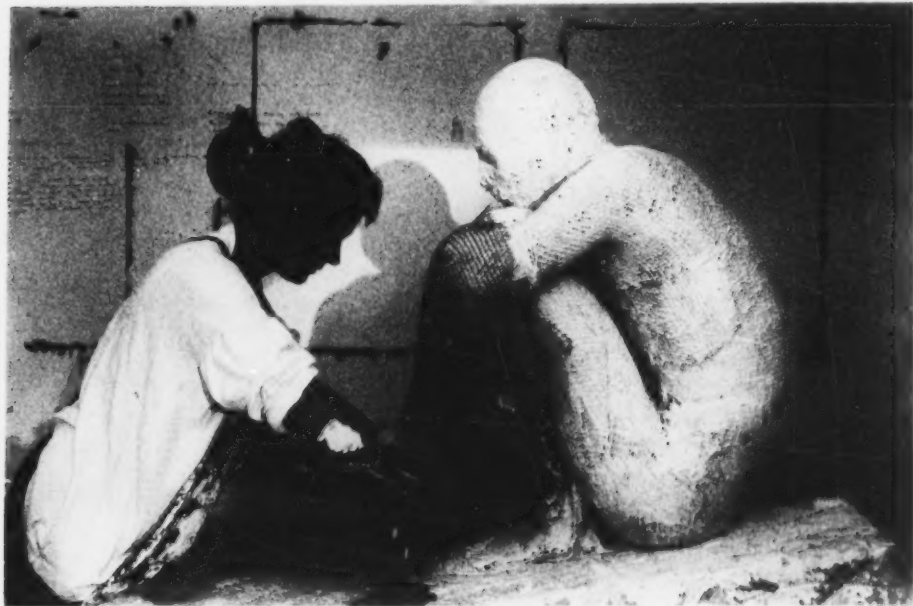
Value, commodity and criticism

Programme two considers five places in which 'validation and valuation' occur: the private gallery, the private collection, the public museum, the art magazine and the public site. How is critical evaluation arrived at and what are the economic interests that underpin it? Interviews with dealers Michael Werner and Mary Boone, the director of the Deutsche Bank's collection Dr Zapp ('the bank has never, in its 120 year history, seen itself as a purely financial institution') and the producer of *Dynasty* and *The Colbys*, the collector Douglas Kramer ('I'm obsessed with owning') give a clear insight into art as a paranational

industry and increasingly consumerist source of social value (particularly in the States). In the following section — an interview with Richard Koshalek, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles — the part the big museums play in the ratification and extension of this process is examined, in particular their mediation between artists and industry on collaborative urban gentrification projects. These forms of managerial control (of both resources and meaning) are then placed up against the 'independence' of art's critical culture. The programme ends with interviews with the editor of *Artforum*, Ingrid Sischy, and one of its regular contributors, Thomas McEvilly: 'Criticism clearly has its role as negative criticism. Criticism means really to criticise everything.'

Imagination, creativity and work

Working with a post-romantic view of artistic skills as the product of training (the development of cognitive interests), programme three offers an overview of the vicissitudes of artistic creativity. In interviews with Joseph



2. State of the Art — demonstrating a post-romantic view of artistic skill as the product of training.

Beuys, Anthony Gormley, Miriam Kahn, Howard Hodgkin and Susan Hiller, the status and process of artistic production is variously contrasted. 'For me a nurse is also an artist, or of course, a doctor or a teacher' (Beuys). 'When I create these landscapes...I'm not actually in

control' (Kahn). 'I find it very difficult to think of my activity as an artist in social terms' (Hodgkin).

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*Postmodernism,
television and the
visual arts*

Sexuality, image and identity

In programme four we are back in the world of commerce and business. The programme opens with the preparation for a photographic shoot for *Woman's Journal*. As with the preceding programmes the real serves to focus the site of art's contestation and operation, in this instance the circulation of images of woman as desired object. There are interviews with Cindy Sherman, Alexis Hunter, Eric Fischl, Mary Kelly and Barbara Kruger. The interview with Kruger presents one of the key motifs of the series' postmodernism: cultural politics as a particularist struggle across many fronts. 'I think to label something political within culture today is really to disarm it in a way, and I think that it tends to ghettoize particular activity. I think that there is a politic in every conversation we have, every deal we close and every face we kiss.'

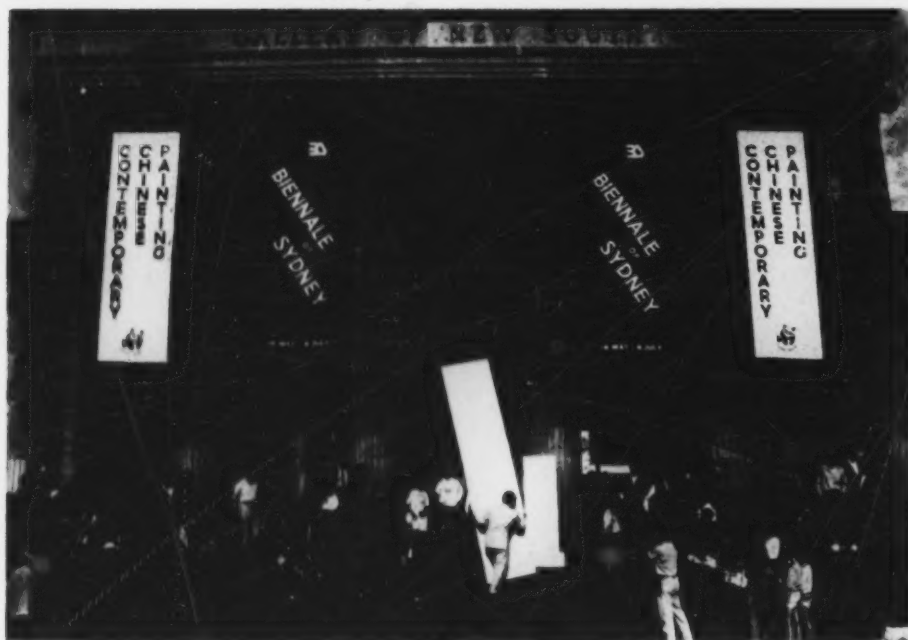
Politics, intervention and representation

The programme opens with a shot of the offices of Independent Television News in London. Stuart Hall is quoted, arguing that the function of the media is to provide an underlying ideological unity through which disagreement takes place. The question of the political in art is taken up further as a multivalent resistance to this logic in interviews with Leon Golub and Terry Atkinson on history painting, Hans Haacke on intervention within the museum structure, Victor Burgin on male sexuality, and Pete Dunn and Lorraine Leeson on community photography.

Identity, culture and power

The final programme takes up the centre/periphery debate in relation to cultural identity. In a sense the last programme negotiates the 'positive' side of paranational late capitalism: the breakup of national cultural boundaries. The suppression and release of localized cultural differences has become the global terrain of postmodernism's 'war of position'. The programme singles out Australian art as a vivid example of this, given both that white Australian artists feel marginalized in relation to Europe and the USA and that Aboriginal culture stands in a marginal and oppressed relation to Australian settler culture. There are interviews with Terry Smith on the

Sydney Biennale, Thomas McEvilly on the question of 'cultural diffusion', the Aboriginal painter Michael Nelson Tjakamarra on his painting *Possum Dreaming* and the Australian artist Imant Tillers on the virtues of working small: 'For an artist to be producing Kiefer-size canvases and expecting them to be shown outside Australia, it's absolutely ridiculous.' The programme then switches to the condition of emerging black art in Britain in interviews with Lubaina Himid, Donald Rodney, Sonia Boyce and Sutapa Biswas. However, if black art here is shown to be essential to the renewal of British culture, in the final section, which documents the recent media collaboration between Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat, the pitfalls of being absorbed into the art market as exotic spectacle are graphically depicted. Nevertheless, the series ends on an upbeat note, a quotation from Amilcar Cabral: 'Liberation for us is to take back our destiny and our history.'



3. The Sydney Biennale — the suppression and release of localized cultural differences.

In terms of those interviewed, places visited, works filmed and issues raised, *State of the Art* is a successful attempt at mapping out the complexities of art production under capitalism today. The series reveals in all its variation just how massive the extension of art's production (and theorisation) since the late '70s has become under a Western economy that has both increased in real

terms the spending power of those in employment and released those without full-time employment — and no prospect of full-time employment — into self-determined activities. As the series notes, approximately 35000 students graduate from visual art courses in the United States every year, 1400 in Britain, 1900 in West Germany and 850 in France. Admittedly only a small percentage continue to work professionally in any successful sense, but nonetheless the yearly accumulation of numbers (and burgeoning reputations) has brought about an unprecedented expansion of commodity production in the '80s. This, in turn, has generated a huge amount of promotional/theoretical work as the commodity struggles to enter discourse and public validation.

However, if *State of the Art* reflects these conditions in its extensivity of reference, its critical terminology makes clear that the expansion of the day-to-day culture of art, as in the Victorian salon system, offers no comparative expansion in the critical reception of art — quite the opposite. Given the huge amount of kitsch and transparently cynical work being produced and defended under the rubric of this so-called aesthetic flourishing, the judgments the series makes about certain kinds of work — its critical adequacy — on the whole 'get it right'. Whatever one thinks individually about Leon Golub, Terry Atkinson, Susan Hiller, Mary Kelly, Victor Burgin, Joseph Beuys, as representatives of positions within, broadly speaking, a culture of capitalist resistance, their work is unavoidable. It is this sense that, despite the seeming richness of the culture of art today, certain critical values still hold (the raising of 'truth-claims') that gives the series its intellectual integrity and clarity. If one were to point to a single achievement of the series it would be its attempt to *secularize* art's production and consumption. By showing that art participates *in* the world, is made out of extant cultural and cognitive materials, it also shows art to be at work *on* the world.

If my praise is fulsome here, the series nonetheless does not escape substantive criticism. This rests on the very form in which this secularization is presented. For although the structure of the programmes — context shot, quotation, interview — creates a dialectical interchange between work, world and discourse, the accumulated effect is one of the equalization, and at times de-contextualization, of contents and positions. As a privileged reader I may be able to sort out who's who and why they are there and what kind of reputation they have, but, for someone without the relevant information, the relent-

less flow of uncontextualized information can be perplexing. This is not to have a clarification mania where every reference has to be flagged — ambiguity and inference are of course integral to the pleasures of reading — but a concern with the fact that the extensive use of quotation and artists deracinated from their specific histories can lead to a glossing over of differences. Thus, for example, in the final programme we are neither made aware that the work of the black British artists is on the whole the product of a very young (and marginalized) culture, nor that the quotation from Rasheed Araeen which introduces the section is from an artist whose work and writing has done much to lay the foundations for the culture the young black artists are discussing. Twenty-five years of work are swept aside.

Similarly, although all the artists seem to be participating in an art world that is free and equitable in its exchange of ideas, given the basis of such ideas in differing ideologies, the economic positions of the artists remain very different. The series fails to explain the (by no means fixed) hierarchy of values that the market attaches to certain media and contents. As a result the anomalous link between economic and critical success is blurred. Such differences of course can be extrapolated (it is fairly obvious that the market success of Howard Hodgkin's work is dependent upon its modernist-picturesqueness, or that the success of Jean-Michel Basquiat's 'voodoo' painting rests on the art market's appropriation of the graffiti phenomenon) but are never made part of an explicit argument. This has a lot to do with the programmes' perception of such issues as being 'internal' to the art world and therefore of a distracting, specialist nature. If the absence of specialist jargon is to be commended however, the absence of discussion around *why* certain artists have made certain choices is regrettable. Thus we don't learn about the political intentions that are bound up with certain choices and the effects that follow. *Why* do Leon Golub and Terry Atkinson choose to be history painters, or *why* do Barbara Kruger and Peter Dunn and Lorraine Leeson choose to work as photographers, on the whole, outside the gallery network?

This levelling out of issues around means and ends (who is speaking to whom and for what reasons and to what effect) has much to do with the loss of causality which inevitably results from anti-narrative film strategies. But it can also be attributed to what I would call the 'culturalist postmodernist' framework adopted by the programmes. By this I mean a tendency to view the expansion of forms,

interests and contents of art since American abstraction and the reified counter-tradition of social realism from a 'substitutionalist' political perspective, ie, as a contributory progressive force in the putative radical extension of bourgeois democracy. As Sandy Nairne says in the conclusion to the accompanying book of the series: 'In the end all art is political in its resistance to the global culture, which is intent on suppressing views and values that resist its spreading and monotonous patina. As artists challenge the assumptions of conventional history in the making, they create the fragments of a resistance, working to discover not simply who they are, but how we all might be.'¹¹ In one sense this is of course true — art *does* have emancipatory effects — but in the series the multiplicity of art's points of resistance to the values and interests of global capitalism are presented outside any political programme that would make such prefigurative truths democratically available.



Thus the programmes tell us *why* art is important but do not articulate the basis upon which such human flourishing might be democratically achieved; the word socialism is conspicuously absent. In essence we are not told straight what the political stakes for artists, 'working to discover not simply who they are, but how we all might be', actually are in our culture. The absence of any class perspective on art's 'fragmented resistance' — the huge

4. Mary Kelly,
*emphasising the
importance of art
as a cultural
practice.*

gap between art and the working class — leaves the aesthetic truths of art stranded from any real transformative political programme.

Behind the series' articulation of art's expansion across subject positions, ideological fronts and expressive resources, there is a familiar intellectual and political theme: the automatization of politics. Lyotard's theorization of politics as linguistic 'jousting' (politics as competitive language games)¹², Laclau and Mouffe's Eurocommunist line on politics as discursively constructed and separate from any non-discursive material interests¹³, and the post-structuralist legacy of the dissolution of politics into powers, in short the whole critical machinery of the New Revisionism, is at work behind the series' failure to sort out, or rather make explicit, the real structural limits placed upon art's democratic extension. This is not to say that the art the series deals with is not the product of real democratic transformations within the Academy or that a Gramscian 'war of position' is not the best option within the institutions of our culture, but that particularism no matter how radical can only serve as a cover for capitalist interests. As Ellen Meiksins Wood has argued: 'Of course an attack on capitalist hegemony must take the form of challenging this ideological division and expanding the meaning of democracy, but the problem is hardly just a linguistic one. The divide between the spheres in which capitalism can permit democracy to operate (and even here it can do so only up to a point) and those in which it cannot, corresponds to the insurmountable divisions between antagonistic class interests. Here, if not before, there must be a break in the continuum from one form of democracy to the other.'¹⁴ *State of the Art* fudges this — and I say this because what is important about the series is that art is shown to be dealing with ways of doing and being that might have a say in the way a culture not determined by capital might be organized — by presenting the democratic interests of art as if they were participating equitably within bourgeois democratic culture. Thus it is one thing to say there is a politic in every conversation we have and every face we kiss, but another to equate the political effects of different subject positions.

However if I am critical of the series' conflation of postmodernism with a culturalist, conjunctural politics, it is not my intention to deny the validity of postmodernism as a category. *State of the Art* is clearly right in contextualizing postmodernism as a proliferation of critical contents and forms after the closures of high modernism. In these terms it has real explanatory power. However,

much contemporary art theorizing has tended to extrapolate from the aesthetic-cognitive to the epistemological-political, insofar as a break with the linear in modernist aesthetics has been conflated with a break in the 'grand narrative' of class politics — Lyotard being the egregious link figure. That this fails quite baldly to pass the first test of 'theory takeover' — the plausible explanation of large amounts of data — has not prevented a large amount of silly, ameliorist and pessimistic writing on the death of the 'new', 'reason', 'modernity', etc. If *State of the Art* avoids the worst excesses of this (though Lyotard is given his tuppence worth) the particularist politics of the series nonetheless defers to the view that postmodernism has ushered us into a post-Marxist epoch. That such an important issue is not debated *within* the programmes is perhaps the biggest disappointment of the series.

The use of a systematic intertextual aesthetic as the basis for documentary work therefore has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it clearly offers an advance in the complexity and texture of argument over the profile and lecture, but given the tendency of anti-narrative strategies to weaken causality, it can also reduce ideas to a heterogeneous soup. The liberation from the 'pretence of relaying a Real'¹⁵ (a Real that is traceable back to the interests of a single author) can just as easily fall into a politics of representation which is as much assimilative and relativist as 'dialectical'. Generalisable political interests are immobilized by the self-censorship of white, male, middle-class guilt. As such, *State of the Art* is to be judged as a series that has made real advances in its intellectual disregard for the 'transmission problem' and yet is as prey to the formulaic as any other documentary mode. In the acknowledgement of such a gap lies the basis for future critical initiatives.

Notes

- 1 *Broadcast Television and the Visual Arts*, Television South West, 1984 (co-published in *Arts Monthly* February-July 1984).
- 2 Nick Levinson, 'History of Mystery', *ibid*, p 43.
- 3 Melvyn Bragg, 'Twilit Intensity', *ibid*, p 18.
- 4 Nigel Finch, 'Margins of Error', *ibid*, p 36.
- 5 John Wyver, 'From the Parthenon', *ibid*, p 25.
- 6 *ibid*, p 28.
- 7 Broadcast on March 3rd, 1984.
- 8 In between *Just what is it...?* and *State of the Art*, Wyver produced a series of artists videos, *Ghosts in the Machine*. These were broadcast on Tuesday nights between January 7th and February 11th 1986.
- 9 Sandy Nairne in collaboration with Geoff Dunlop and John

- Wyver, *State of the Art: Ideas and Images in the 1980s*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1987, p 9.
- 10 John Wyver, 'From the Parthenon', *op. cit.*
 - 11 Sandy Nairne *et al. op. cit.* p 245.
 - 12 Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984.
 - 13 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London, Verso, 1985.
 - 14 Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat From Class: A New 'True' Socialism*, London, Verso, 1986, p 135.
 - 15 John Wyver, 'Television and Postmodernism', *ICA Documents 5: Postmodernism*, London, Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1986.

ALL THAT IS SOLID MELTS ON THE AIR

Art, video, representation and postmodernity

STEVEN BODE

Fredric Jameson's key postmodern primer, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*¹, as perhaps befits an old head reflecting on a sudden hubbub of changes in the air, is not without its sense of History, or indeed its sense of occasion, being published slap in the middle of Modernism's *annus miserabilis* of 1984. If ever one wanted to make or mark one's break from some of the (more moribund) positions of the Modernist aesthetic, there could hardly be a time more propitious, or more pointed, to do it than this. As George Orwell's 1984's famous history-lesson has it: 'He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past'²). One may flinch from putting it quite so strongly, but a similar dialectic might be claimed for the practice of criticism as well. As postmodernism emerges, within Western culture, as our new 'cultural dominant', a process and a trend Jameson's work most clearly defines; it is perhaps he or she who best understands the failures of modernism who is in the best position to comment on what comes next.

1984 — the myth, maybe more than the year as such — was always going to be something of a bugbear for modernism and the Left; a kind of admonitory nadir or awful negation of a positive modernist ideal; a vision of society, furthermore, whose relation to the TV screen perhaps reflects the dark underside of our contemporary seduction by the image. Yet, if Orwell's projected dystopia did not — in reality — turn out quite as black as he painted it (more used as a catch-all scare against a contracting, centralizing cultural Left by its political and stylistic opponents); the year itself brought into focus a number of

contemporary epistemological challenges. By 1984, and throughout the early Eighties, many of the representational mainstays of modernism, also, were either in crisis or in retreat. Just as the notion of a modernist high culture might seem to have collapsed under the pressure of a commodified consumer culture with its intricate mediations, so might pre-eminent forms of representation seem challenged or contradicted by a new proliferation and saturation of images, with a consequent call for new perspectives to help picture this density and diversity in our midst. Grand narratives and dominant readings were sensed to have broken down and more multiple strategies were sought. Although modernism had actively embodied the salient values — of crisis, of progress, of disjunction — of a radical avant-garde, many of these values had become absorbed to the point where, in time, they seemed just another set of conventions. In short, as Jürgen Habermas puts it, modernism seemed 'dominant but dead'³.

As Jameson's article records however, the first signs of an abandoning of a number of significant modernist tenets, the first sense of an End (of the Novel: in Burroughs, Pynchon and the *nouveau roman*; of Art: in Warhol, pop art and beyond; even of the human subject itself: in the structuralist speculations of Foucault and Lacan) could be glimpsed well in advance of any extra promptings this millennial bench-mark might have bestowed. Postmodern approaches had affected literature, dance and the visual arts, but they could be seen most early and most emphatically in architecture, where the fault-lines of an, as it were, in-house crisis began showing themselves even before actual cracks started appearing in the concrete high-rise buildings and estates that starkly represented the modernist style ascendant. It would not take much to read the observable flaws of modernist planning somehow as metaphors for cracks in a crumbling modernist ideal; an indictment that is in a way too simple by half, yet one that is at the same time pressing, palpable and, moreover, popularly upheld and understood. Which is important, since many of the debates about the whys and wherefores of postmodernism and the way one relates to one's culture have often gone on, to excuse the pun, over people's heads.

If architecture supplies a clinching logic for at least the merits of a postmodern case, it also acts as a useful touchstone for the movement's quantum shifts. Jameson, in his *Postmodernism* article⁴, is at his most heady and inventive describing the new architectural phenomena that, in his words, engender a qualitatively different kind

of relation of the individual to his urban *milieu*. Distinctive Postmodern set-pieces like Los Angeles' Bonaventura Hotel — with its elaborate walkways and shifting perspectives — elicit his attention for exhibiting the varied elements of an emerging Postmodern style for everyone to see. A style that looks forward as it looks back, making use of classical and ornamental motifs within an overall conception that is avowedly populist in tone: a kind of rococo-retro that 'without principle but with gusto cannibalizes all the architectural styles of the past and combines them in overstimulating ensembles'⁵. For Jameson, this particular imperative lies in the forefront of the transformations Postmodernism might be seen to effect: a 'shock of the new', with the emphasis less on the new and more on the (sensory) shock; a kind of electric overload or excess that mixes up familiar elements into something pleasurable and disorientating by turns.

At another point in the essay, in a moment in which we are perhaps meant to divine a wisp of the city poetics of Benjamin on Baudelaire⁶, Jameson looks down from the surrounding hills over the hazy, apparitional Los Angeles skyline, a shimmering corporate downtown whose gleaming, depthless two-dimensionality has replaced the bustling fabric of modern city life. Where the city could in the past have been conceived of as an engine, a dynamo of modernist thinking, here the overriding impression is one of surface, abstraction, silence: the complex lines of electronic communications and the myriad flows of multinational capital unseen behind the façades; the bright mirror-glass exteriors of these buildings providing a vaguely glimmering spectacle for the gaze but no kind of purchase or insight as to what goes on behind. (It is one of Jameson's themes that we have an *image*, but no way of adequately 'mapping', the complex inter-relationships of capitalism, technology and the media on which a postmodern sensibility rests.) If there is a Benjaminesque sense of loss underscoring such a perspective, it is one that might nevertheless be made up for in a changing spatial dynamic that opens up new types of possibility for the postmodern *flâneur*: a new kind of hyper-space or hyper-reality in which to wander and make connections yet which, in its fluid nature, demands that traditional modes of discourse and conventional ways of seeing be re-tested or re-thought.

Just as these key postmodern features — a promiscuous pastiche of styles, the 'de-centring' effect (in the viewer) of such a turn-round of images, a collapsing of the distinctions between 'high' culture and 'low', a stress on

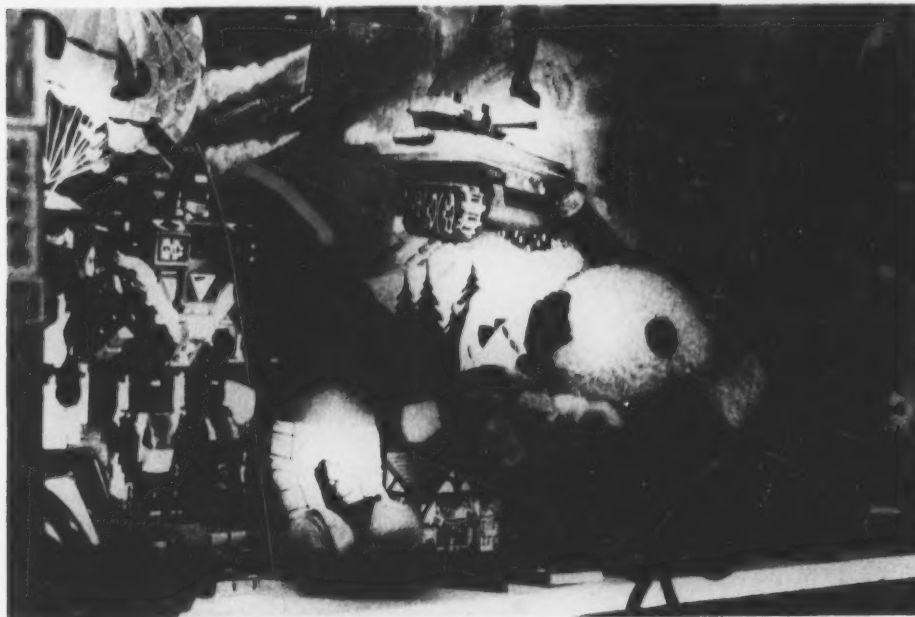
surface rather than depth — might be said to increasingly mark the direction of the fields of architecture and design, so equally might they be seen to configure one or other salient aspects of video or art. Though the hybrid yet high-tech aesthetics of video — and particularly the cross-cultural phenomenon of the pop video — would seem to have an obvious place within the postmodern landscape Jameson describes, discussion of popular or experimental manifestations of the form is limited, in the *Postmodernism* article at least, to a brief consideration of the work of the video artist, Nam June Paik. In plushly sculptural installation like Paik's *TV Garden*— in which blossoming beds of flowers are arranged around banks of monitors showing flickering images of prime-time TV — Jameson senses a striking example of a particularly postmodern mode. Certainly, watching the installation the viewer is left in a particularly postmodern fix. An old allegiance to a single unfolding thread of narrative, a central (dominant) image, or, in this case, an individual screen, gets one nowhere, especially with other — different — sights clamouring for attention out of the corner of one's eye. Yet, as Jameson notes, the postmodern view, here, like increasingly everywhere, where the surfeit of significant images bombards us everyday, is 'asked to do the impossible', to absorb all the sources at once, to engage with them 'in all their radical and random difference ... in (their) discontinuous variety'⁷. Standing back from the work, however, in an attempt to stretch or shift one's perspective, to accommodate the overwhelming array of signs, one is left all the more with an overriding impression: one of dressed and decorative flux. Evaluation of the piece, on any set of merits, is as complex as the piece itself. Even so, there is much in its attention and scale that chimes concordantly — in a sense unconsciously — with our complex, often fragmentary, understanding of the contemporary image-world and much, equally, in its clear associations — to the TV walls and garden arrangements that line the consumer paradises of our indoor shopping malls — that begins to provide a sense of the flows of commerce and of capital that underpins it. In its form, however, without wanting to overstate it, the piece embodies something of the *compellingness* and the *dilemmas* of postmodern styles of representation; ones that move beyond some of the commonplaces or closures of modernism to reflect a more contemporary disparity or diversity, yet in doing so run the risk of being read as chaotic, or confusing, in themselves.

In the contemporary form of the pop video also, these

features and preoccupations can be seen to recur. As critics like E. Ann Kaplan have more or less subtly drilled home⁸, one finds in the pop video a general abandoning of even the pretext of linear narrative, with an emphasis instead on the 'textual' 'intensities' of elaborate clusters of images and special effects. Pop videos also revel and proliferate in a particular postmodern collage or cross-referencing of styles. They, as a matter of course, under the fast-moving imperatives of fashion, refer reflexively back to, and try to top, their immediate stylistic antecedents. Yet they also clearly pastiche classic *genres* or motifs; not only — most notably — from Hollywood Film but also — and indiscriminately — images and devices from the plastic arts; or indeed, for that matter, from any 'high' or 'low' cultural source. One might expect to see, in the sealed world of the pop video — a place where literally anything can happen — the *mis-en-scene* of a well-known movie, the imagery of a famous painter and the plotline of a popular cartoon brought deliriously together in what seems a perfect analogue of Jameson's description of postmodern architecture's 'overstimulating ensembles'.

Such a rush of stimulation and self-conscious simulation, likewise produces a strange kind of de-centredness in the viewer, which, in keeping with the logic of commodification of contemporary consumer culture, relies on the next video — the next burst of momentary stimuli — to

1. *The work of Susan Hiller, emphasising how as different media cross over into or evoke each other, the play of changing relations offers a greater textual richness which might act as the measure of a new kind of 'media art'.*



correct. In 24-hour music stations like America's MTV, visual (over)stimulation reaches almost narcotic levels. In disc-jockey parlance, the hits keep on coming — to the point where distinctions are relative, where differences blur. As with all alluring commodities, and like the adverts with which they share air-time and which they so closely resemble, pop videos are more concerned with the glossy image on the surface and less with questions of content and depth. Sharing, as it does, an intimate relation with commerce, advertising and the art of media manipulation, the pop video might also be taken to prefigure — in an extreme but exemplary manner — the encroaching commodification that haunts a significant aspect of postmodern representation. The formal contradictions that inhere in a pastiche, an *admixing* of disparate styles, are literally glossed over in an over arching imperative of *style*; where, as in advertising, the *image* (or, at least, its effectivity) is the bottom line, and a free slide of signifiers, cut off from their (referential, historical) signifieds, is left to its own (visual) devices; where, as in music television, the solid oppositions of 'culture' and 'kitsch', of 'image' and 'reality' that had sustained so much modernist thinking, suddenly melt, as it were, on the air.

As contemporary art practice either becomes entangled in or embraces the worlds of commerce and the media, quintessentially postmodern forms like the pop video can seem bland, dispiriting proof of a coming, all-encompassing trend. Nevertheless, this new situation — in its very complexity — cuts both ways. As different media cross over into or evoke each other, a play of changing relations with the promise of a greater textual richness might act as the measure of a new kind of 'media art'. Similarly, as more documentary-based forms become more open to different techniques and less tied to linear, univocal conventions, new tactics of *bricolage* or deconstruction might come to be adopted by critical artists to make different textual or political points; a way of showing up or breaking down received ideas or everyday perspectives that has an equal visual reward for both the 'privileged' and the 'popular' viewer. Even so, especially in a culture that is invested and inflected as much by textual cross-over as by ambivalence and confusion, a line needs to be drawn between astute and conscious *bricolage* as a *practice* and a merely superficial stylistic *mélange*; though, to a degree, such a line depends on a critical distance from ones' object that postmodern structuralist thinking might be said to have undermined. Moreover, it is a line that can, again, be easily blurred when so many visual forms are

increasingly focused and read at the surface.

To an extent, such a consideration may have played a significant part in the critical reception of scratch video, whose generally didactic re-presentations of superficial, or shocking TV imagery might in a number of cases, be read as much as celebration as deliberate critique. Similarly, specific video art pieces which seek to problematize particular issues or styles of representability or representation, and practiced in opposition to more 'commercial' forms of video and TV, might, in their use of eye-catching visuals, again be seen — at the surface — as a simple matter of visual play. For example: George Snow's *Muybridge Revisited* — in its admittedly dazzling digital animation of original images by founding photographer, Eadwaerd Muybridge — uses those images in a decorative aesthetic approach that is very much a matter of postmodern pastiche. Simon Robertshaw's *Biometrika*, on the other hand, uses similar Muybridge images, with similar high post-production values, in a multi-levelled visual essay that challenges our views of 'normality' and our representation of the mentally ill. There is obviously a danger that the critical edge of the latter will become less and less noticed under a dominant perspective that goes no deeper than the surface effect.

For all that, video technology, with its ability to access and animate, augment and amalgamate any number of individual components from our vast cultural storehouse of images, has indisputably been a shaping factor in determining a particularly postmodern and potentially rewarding reflection on art. Playing on or with images, for instance, is not just creatively in vogue but, with advances in digital equipment, increasingly in reach. Often this kind of artistic play, especially in the new form of video where technical innovations often help mask a return to an older set of ideas, has sensed a kindred spirit (and a re-exploitable set of trademarks) in art movements that were signally playful themselves (surrealism, pop art, Dada, the vivid cryptic dreamscapes of Duchamp and Magritte⁹). To take one example of this process in evidence in the realm of video art: Joan Jonas's video interpretation of Paul Simon's song *Rene and Georgette Magritte*, which, as a piece in its own right, best exemplified the more 'popular' strand of programming in Channel 4's showcase *Ghosts in the Machine*. Here, images slide and spin into compositional arrangements evocative of Magritte; a slow-motion sequence describes a mood of delicate surreality; a number of key works of the painter are — either in figure or framing — pastiched. The overall tone is one of

affectionate irony, even of wistful *hommage*. Yet, while the tape presupposes a knowledge — however minimal — of art history and in particular movements like surrealism for its effect, it tells us nothing, in its playful allusiveness, its apparently new combinations, beyond any sense we might already have had. Its free-floating images have a context but they lack any real co-ordinates; provide no insight as to how the qualities of fantasy and imagery free-play once had a particular rationale for artists like Magritte.

In a similar vein, video artist Steve Hawley's *Trout Descending a Staircase* takes its line, and its punchline, from the painting *Nude Descending a Staircase* by Duchamp — and, in the spirit of such an allusion, enacts an elegant visual joke. Using the myriad possibilities of a video paint box, Hawley electronically 'paints' on to a television screen, offhandedly using a number of unusual-cum-ordinary objects including flower stalks, vegetables and the eponymous trout. Though the tape's impish pastiching and deliberately throwaway reference to a canonical art-historical work might be felt to be markedly postmodern features, it would obviously be wrong to too hastily identify types of play with emergent technology with a particularly postmodern mode. Forms of video painting, as for instance featured on BBC Television's series *Painting With Light*, seem at a nascent, exploratory stage; their frequent combination of figured and abstract forms as easily explained by their tentativeness or speculativeness as by any more self-conscious approach. Nevertheless, the grounds for a significantly postmodern meeting of fine art, popular art and technology are obviously there. As is the possibility that, with advanced computer-image techniques, new forms will arise to transcend or transform existing genres or styles. Video paintings like Brian Eno's *Thursday Afternoon* or *Mistaken Memories of Mediaeval Manhattan*, or his gallery installation *Paintings with Sound and Light*, for all their concern with creating a new kind of mood or environment, seem more readily placed within a Modernist tradition of meditative, ambient work.

Lest one always associate the relation of art and video with representational complexity or high-tech innovation, it should be noted that video has played an important role — in the main because of its ease of use and distribution — in chronicling particular art events (such as the *Luminous Image* installation compilation from Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum) or in completing documentary/archival records of particular art-historical figures and trends. In

terms however, of a video arts documentary which attempts to use significantly postmodern devices and forms of address, Nam June Paik and Shigeko Kubota's *Allan and Allen's Complaint* stands out. A parallel, increasingly multiple, study of poet Allen Ginsberg and performance artist Allan Kaprow (provocatively claimed by the makers as the two most important post-war American artists), the tape constantly swaps styles and shifts gear. Flash-backs and jumps-forward regularly occur; the tape is rewound, moved on and started again; the screen is filled and fragmented with special effects; the programmes's (already eccentric) frontperson has his voice speeded up and slowed down — moments that disrupt and bring new light to a more familiar documentary pattern of personal interviews and glimpses of the artist at work. Many of these effects, it has to be said, seem to derive more from Sixties pranksterism than any specific postmodernism. Yet there are times — most notably in the closing split-screen sequence featuring Allen Ginsberg and his father — where an elliptical opening up of the traditional arts documentary format has an especially striking case. (Though whether such a device is intrinsically postmodern or is only made more to seem so in the overall context is obviously a matter for debate.)

More successful perhaps in pointing to the shape and significant potential of a postmodern arts documentary is Triplevisions's remarkable *Prisoners*. Bringing a myriad resonance to the story of Ridley Scott's celebrated 1984 commercial for Apple computers, the tape, in both its structure and its context, raises and embodies a number of particularly postmodern questions as to the way media representation, consumer capitalism and postmodernism are intimately interlinked. Not the least significant factor in this is the advert itself, a visually compelling pastiche of a popular Orwellian vision: its set, and its throng of extras, dominated by an image of Big Brother on a massive video screen. An advert that was at the time, the most expensive ever made, and one lent a singular aura by the money that went into its production, the publicity that surrounded its making and the fact that it was only ever to be screened once during the United States Superbowl.

Prisoners is an assemblage of different elements concerned with the making of Scott's 1984 commercial: footage shot by Triplevision and later (with an added soundtrack featuring Irving Berlin's 'Putting on the Ritz') used as a corporate promotional video for Apple Computers; the advert itself, first 'quoted' in part then shown in full; Triplevision's interviews with a number of extras on

set, many of whom were members of skinhead groups (shot independently of the rest of the footage used); plus salient passages quoted from Orwell's *1984* — all played off and contrasted against each other so as to foreground the contradictions inherent in the advert's text; both through juxtapositions in the editing and through the use of a number of complex video effects. The advert itself is the centrepiece around which the tape's whole visual essay turns: opening with an astonishing visualization derived from the themes and scenarios of Orwell's book and culminating in the image of 'Big Brother' on a massive video screen being shattered by a hammer blow. The advert ends with a voice-over announcing the company's new computer, one that will ensure that '1984 won't be like 1984'.

In its brief format, the advert presents a vision of a future totalitarian dystopia, whose power and effectivity is broken through a burst of inspired individual action, whose force, effect and significance is paralleled to the perfection and production of a new model of computer. This obviously involves the mobilization of a complex bank of images and associations (principally those of *1984*), whose broader implications are suppressed in the advert through both its pace and the narrative closure affected by its voice-over. All that is disavowed in the construction of the advert is however returned, in all its awkward complexity, in *Prisoners*; the power of the advert, like the power of the image in general, being signalled in a number of different ways. Even so, a voice-over ends the tape on a note of caution; one that could be applied to all visual critiques that situate themselves within the same forms, and which (in an attempt at criticism and/deconstruction) must necessarily re-present the original image again:

It seems as though the sheer weight of the image has overcome any intention — strangely this has also happened in the adverts; the simple voice-over cannot regain the ground lost...

But despite the video's own qualifiers, *Prisoners* situates the imagery of Scott's advert in a fuller, more complex context than its original and thereby works against any single dominant message the advert might be attempting to communicate.

In a culture where postmodern forms of representation are felt to frequently efface, conceal (or at best) blur the contexts of their production; the tape, with its shifting, multi-faceted and distinctly postmodern perspectives, is exemplary in providing an insight into the often complex

realities that underlie the production and perception of images in contemporary western society. Within its modest project, *Prisoners* points to the possibility of constructing a progressive textual form, within a postmodern aesthetic, whose acuity and effectivity belies the blanket perception of all that is postmodern being inevitably *hollow* and necessarily devoid of any possibility of (inter-textual) *depth*.

Notes

- 1 Fredric Jameson 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capital' in *New Left Review* 146, July/August 1984.
- 2 George Orwell, 1984, London, Martin, Secker and Warburg, 1949, Chapter IX.
- 3 Jurgen Habermas, quoted in Hal Foster 'Postmodernism: A Preface' in Foster *op. cit.*
- 4 Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capital' *op. cit.*
- 5 *ibid.*
- 6 See Walter Benjamin *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, London, New Left Books, 1973.
- 7 Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capital' *op. cit.*
- 8 E. Ann Kaplan *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism and Consumer Culture*, London, Methuen, 1987.
- 9 Jameson cites Duchamp as an honorary postmodernist *avant la lettre*, see Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capital' *op. cit.*, p 56.

ARTISTS MYTHOLOGIES AND MEDIA GENIUS, MADNESS AND ART HISTORY

GRISELDA POLLOCK

In the growing marxist literature on the history of art considerable attention has been paid to the defaults of current art history: the failure of that discipline which purports to provide a *history* of art, to engage with, or even acknowledge, any but the most simplistic, recognisable notion of history let alone of production, class or ideology. Crucial questions have not been posed about *how* art history works to exclude from its field of discourse history, class, ideology, to produce an ideological, 'pure' space for something called 'art', sealed off from and impenetrable to any attempt to locate art practice within a history of production and social relations. The absence of such work is critical on many accounts. It is a major impediment to radical practices within and on art history — for without an analysis of the ideologies of art history, radical studies of artistic production have no effect as an intervention. They can be represented by the art historical establishment as a marginal alternative dismissed as an unwarrantable extension of other academic disciplines, such as sociology, or as political ideologies, which are considered extrinsic to art history's 'proper' concerns. Above all, they are rejected as self-evidently anti-'art'. Without identifying the effects of art-historical ideologies as guarantees of dominant notions of art and the artist, the different kind of work on the history of this area of cultural production is prevented from having any effect on art history and other areas of cultural analysis and practice. That specific area of cultural production known as the history of art is marginalized. It is either dismissed by leftist populism as an elitist extension of high culture or is simply unexamined through ignorance of either art history or its effects. Furthermore, when some attempts are made to reclaim art

for history, they tend to occur within a liberal ideology of art as document of social history. This article is primarily an account of the dominance of the ideologies of art history across a wide and extended field of cultural discourse, sites of cultural consumption and areas of cultural practice. In this article I shall concentrate on the central constructions of art and the artist produced by art history and secured by its hegemonic role throughout this network. The prime area of attention is the figure of the artist. In 1949, the marxist art historian Frederik Antal wrote a paper 'Remarks on the Method of Art History'. He considered the historical development of the discipline and the various tendencies within different schools of art history which had emerged since the late nineteenth century. He concluded the survey, which is still pertinent, with the following observations:

Although lately it has become fashionable to introduce a few historical facts, these may only enter the art historical picture when confined to hackneyed political history, in a diluted form, which gives as little indication as possible of the existing structure of society and does not disturb the romantic twilight of the atmosphere. The last redoubt which will be held as long as possible is, of course, the most deep-rooted nineteenth century belief... of the incalculable nature of genius in art.¹

This core, against which all attempts to investigate modes and systems of representation and historical conditions of production (ie a social history of art) break, is signified by the most typical discursive forms of art historical research and writing — the monograph (a study of the artist's life and work), and the *catalogue raisonné* (the collection of the complete *oeuvre* of the artist whose coherence as an individual creator is produced by assembling all of his or (rarely) her work in an expressive totality). But there is more to this than collecting diverse fragments in order to unite them by a designated author, a category problematized and analysed by Foucault and taken up in recent debates in *Screen*². The preoccupation with the individual artist is symptomatic of the work accomplished in art history — the production of an *artistic subject for works of art*. The subject constructed from the art work is then posited as the exclusive source of meaning — ie, of 'art', and the effect of this is to remove 'art' from historical or textual analysis by representing it solely as the 'expression' of the creative personality of the artist. Art is therefore neither public, social, nor a product of work. Art and the artist become reflexive, mystically bound into an unbreakable circuit which produces the

artist as the subject of the art work and the art work as the means of contemplative access to that subject's 'transcendent' and creative subjectivity. The construction of an artistic subject for art is accomplished through current discursive structures — the *biographic*, which focuses exclusively on the individual, and the *narrative*, which produces coherent, linear, causal sequences through which an artistic subject is realized. I think it is useful to apply some of these categories of the analysis of narrative to the writing of art history, which not only narrates certain events but constitutes them as a narrative, subjected to a teleological impulse, while also enjoining 'narrativity' from the reader by the presentation of the events narrated in the coherence within the orders of temporality and causality. Art history can be therefore designated as a *literature* rather than a history or a historical discourse.

The material for my argument comes from a detailed case-study of a nineteenth century Dutch painter, Vincent Van Gogh (also cited as VG³), who occupies a special place in both art history and 'general knowledge'. VG is the well-known and popular artist. No other Western European painter is so universally familiar. More reproductions are sold of his work than any other artist of any country, school or period. Exhibitions of his work draw large crowds throughout the world from New York to Korea. He is the subject of innumerable books, films (like *Lust for Life* (1956)), novels, television documentaries and so on. A large museum is now dedicated to VG — the Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh in Amsterdam — and displays a permanent exhibition of his paintings and drawings while also selling books, postcards, calendars, slides and other memorabilia to tourists from all over the world. VG reproductions adorn school corridors and dentists' waiting rooms. An exhibition in 1979 at a museum in Groningen in the Netherlands documented a movement in the 1940s and 1950s for the improvement and modernization of taste and decoration in working class homes. Reproductions of VG's paintings were conspicuous on the walls of these model homes.

This exceptional status and degree of popular knowledge can be relied upon as mediation between these publics and 'art' in general. For instance the title of a touring exhibition sent in 1979 by the Dutch Government to Japan and the Far East was packaged as *Dutch painting in the Century of Van Gogh*. On 14 November 1979, a large and expensive exhibition of European painting from 1880-1905 entitled *Post-Impressionism* opened at the Royal

Academy in London. One example of attendant publicity for this show was the cover of the *Observer* Colour Supplement which reproduced a portrait by Van Gogh and was captioned: *The Post-Impressionists — William Feaver on a major new show of paintings by Van Gogh and other artists.*

1. The Sunflowers
(1888?)

Post-Impressionism, the designation of a period of art



practice, is personalized and individualized as a group of artists, the Post-Impressionists. But it was the name Van Gogh, the artist represented by a characteristically accessible and humanist portrait, that was used as the publicity draw. This 'popularity', this status evidenced by the use of 'Van Gogh' as a signifier of artist, as a sign in an advertisement for an art exhibition, as the mediator between general publics and 'other artists', and indeed other art, present in this variety of sites and texts, indicates that 'Van Gogh' has become a paradigm of the 'modern artist'.

Closer reading of the variety of texts through which this figure 'Van Gogh' is constructed produces a more complex signification. Around his life and work what appears to be a particular form of discourse has developed — a special way of discussing the artist and his works which is presented as if it were only a response to, a reflection of, his exceptional special individuality, his genius. By investigating the constitution of this special discourse in art historical literature, and in many other texts which address 'Van Gogh', it is possible to show the contrary. These modes which offer themselves as appropriate and singular approaches to a discrete individual are, in effect, the paradigmatic modes of art history's construction of the artistic subject, and the category of art.

Although this argument is based in part on moving out of the area of art historical discourse and tracing 'Van Gogh' across a number of texts and representations, the important effect of this mapping out of the reading of VG is that it returns us to art history, to its curatorial role in culture, producing and ensuring particular constructions of art and definitions of the artist.

This can best be examined by taking two examples from art historical texts in which two authors who occupy respected and influential positions within art history have addressed the issue of VG's popular status and appeal, Novotny and Hammacher. In 1953 the Viennese art-historian, Fritz Novotny, published a study on 'The Popularity of Van Gogh'⁴ in which he attempted to refute the idea that Van Gogh's renown was falsely based on a fascination with his unhappy life. Novotny's article opens by quoting a 1947 radio broadcast in which it was argued that VG's popularity was spurious. It resulted from the over-exploitation of the human interest of his biography, the dramatic events of his life, his suicide, 'sentimental factors' and 'curiosity' about his abnormalities'. However, as I shall show, the apparent distance between the popularizing and the art historical correctives which

follow is little more than appearance. What is at stake is power, control over what is said and how it is said in order to retrieve VG from popular humanism — 'he was a bit odd but really he suffered just like the rest of us' and to relocate him in that special sphere, art, the domain of art history.

In Novotny's opinion, Van Gogh's popularity was genuinely 'a quite extraordinary phenomenon — great art becomes popular in the true sense'. For Novotny it was VG's greatness as an artist and the accessibility of his art that produced VG's widespread appeal. Novotny discounted his life or personality as pertinent to an understanding of VG's art. He sought to explain why 'Van Gogh's art has proven approachable for an astonishingly great number of people'. A number of problems inherent in Novotny's formulations are immediately apparent — his categories of great art and popular appeal, his notion of an absolute separation between the personality of the man and the character of the artist, his constant surprise that great art should attract a great number of people, as if there were no interests and institutions at work in the manufacture of the books, the organization of the exhibitions, the production of broadcasts, and so on.

However, Novotny's argument is not as radical a departure from the position he is criticizing as it might at first appear. In the place of the psychobiographical over-emphasis on Van Gogh's life and personal misfortunes, he offers a reading of the paintings that is in fact profoundly psychobiographical. I use the term psychobiographical to characterize the psychologistic emphases which occur in both art historical and related literature on VG. These studies are not merely narrations of the events of VG's life and work but psychological interpretations whose main drive is to discover the subjective 'truth of the artist'.

Novotny constructs from the careful analysis of VG's paintings and drawings an artistic subject, the personality of the painter. The distinction I perceive between Novotny and those he is criticizing is one between the subjectivity of an individual expressing itself in painting and the subjectivity of a painter revealed through the paintings. The distinction may seem slight but the emphasis is crucial because what is at issue is the notion of an unhappy man who paints and, on the other hand, an artist into whose 'artistness' all other facets and circumstances of his living are subsumed. Novotny wrote in order to challenge the tendency to mistake Van Gogh's *personal* biography for an artistic biography. And it is the production of that exclusively artistic subject that is the main

project of art historical practice.

In place of, for example, Irving Stone's biography of a man who was an artist, *Lust for Life* (London, 1935), the art historian produces the monograph which, while, in effect, not more than an *illustrated* biography, traces the life of a special kind of person, the artist, from life to death, within the narrow limits of only that which serves to render all that is narrated as signifiers of artistness. The monograph is paralleled by the *catalogue raisonné* — the chronological ordering of the products of this 'artistness' through which can be reconstructed the linear development of an artistic biography. The *catalogue raisonné* also performs an economic function, for it is the main means by which art history services the art maker through authentication, dating, and providing provenances ('pedigrees' of the painting's previous owners back to the moment it left the artist's workshop or studio), back to its creative origin. The economic value of a painting depends also on the status of its author. A painting by Rembrandt is more valuable than a work by a lesser known contemporary, primarily because a 'Rembrandt' has a documented place within an *oeuvre*, an *oeuvre* which has a subject — the 'Rembrandt' produced within the overlapping discourses of monograph and catalogue. It is easy to trace the correlation between the 'rediscovery' of a hitherto unknown artist, the production of a catalogue of all the known works by that artist, the publication of a monographic study and the rise and stabilization of high prices for works by that artist on the art market.

The first *catalogue raisonné* of the work of VG was published in the 1920s, revised in the 1930s and re-edited and republished in a lavishly illustrated form in 1970. The introductory essay, by A.M. Hammacher, entitled *Van Gogh and the Words*, surveyed the main tendencies of Van Gogh literature since his death in 1890 to 1970. Hammacher also addressed the popular status of VG and asked:

Do people go in crowds to queue at exhibitions out of love of the myth of painting and sculpture, out of love for a style, or is it, where Van Gogh is concerned, a popularity that is aroused via the intermediary of Lust for Life? Are the words, Vincent's and other men's words, unavoidable on the way to the paintings.⁵

Such a passage raised further questions — it implies the possibility of a 'pure' response to and an unmediated experience of VG's paintings. Words, whether VG's or others, are seen as obstacles on the way to the paintings. Hammacher's text typifies an assumption which one

encounters amongst artists, art students, art historians and in texts which pose themselves as 'radical' alternatives. Paintings are proffered as the repository of VG's meanings of and for himself, and the viewer is positioned as witness to him and his meanings, through direct visual or perceptual 'experience'.

In a subsequent passage, Hammacher expresses his pleasure at the spectacle of countless Japanese from the Emperor to shoeshine boys filing happily through the 1958 VG exhibition in Tokyo concluding 'One may safely forget the art slogans of "democracy" and "socialization" [mis-translation for socialism I presume]' The genuine 'popularity' of VG is presented as having trans-class, trans-cultural accessibility. Bourgeois humanism — the category of man as a universal figure above and outside of class relations — is reproduced within the notion of art as the embodiment of an artistic subject which is available to direct perception. The multiplicity of readings of VG's paintings from different class and cultural positions are subsumed into a notion of his accessibility sustained by the construction of art as a visual experience of a self-exposed in paint on canvas.

It is here that we encounter the manoeuvres of art historical writing to secure the dominance of its discourses, its frames of reference, over all other words on art. The discipline lives by producing and selling its words — a *literature*; it disdains and seeks to displace all non-art-historically formulated words — like, for instance, Stone's fictional biography of VG. The regulated, institutionally trained, professional literature of art history uses its own words to produce a notion of art as ineffable, pristine, discrete — a non-verbal experience rooted in the difference of the artist, who is simultaneously distinct from other men and yet the epitome of universal man. It thus simultaneously separates art from social history and protects its own position as the privileged producer of a 'literature of art'.

If VG is produced as the paradigm of the artist, that place is supported by the assimilation of VG to another historical representation, the correspondence of 'madness' and 'art' — the myth of the mad genius. All aspects of VG's life story and the stylistic features of the work culminating in VG's self-mutilation and suicide has provided material to be reworked into a complex but familiar image of the madness of the artist — 'sensitive, tormented, yet incredibly brilliant' as an advertisement for a limited edition of gold medals struck with reproductions of VG's most famous paintings in a *Sunday Times Colour Supplement*

aptly restated it.

The question presents itself: Why do we need VG as *mad* genius? This can best be considered by recognizing that the notions of madness and art which produce the category 'mad genius' have little to do with clinical pathology or definitions of sanity, but circle around categories of difference, otherness, excess. They concern those special and distinct modes of being which set the artist ineffably apart. Some have argued that the madness attributed to the artist is a means of displacing the threat of rupture of discourse produced by artistic practices. I find this suspiciously romantic: it is already part of the myth of mad genius. For the present I want to suggest that the discourse on madness and art operates to sever art and artist from history and to render both unavailable to those without the specialized knowledge of its processes which art history claims for itself. The art historian, the trained professional, stands as the necessary mediator of art to the public: art historical words function as exegesis or translation; historical analysis is replaced by what Macherey designated as 'interpretative criticism'. This practice attempts to dismantle the art work or text to liberate and extract an immanent but singular meaning.

Translation and reduction: focusing the apparent diversity of the work in a single signification. And: Thus we have posited the principles of an immanent criticism: the work encloses a meaning which must be released; the letter of the work is a mask, eloquent and deceptive which this meaning bears; a knowledge of the work is an ascent to this central unique meaning⁶.

In terms of art history and tendencies to such interpretative criticism, the meaning extracted from an artistic text is that which produces as meaning an authorial subjectivity, the artist. The implication of genius and madness serves to secure that subjectivity as the revealed meaning of the work of art.

Art historical practice takes place within specific but diversified conditions of production — both the production of knowledge of definition for art, and the production of books and related commodities that purvey that knowledge. Van Gogh occupies a particular place in art publishing, not only in terms of large, expensive and weighty tomes, like the three volumes of his letters (often presented as diaries of an autobiography) translated and published in numerous languages, the *catalogue raisonné*, and the volumes of redatings of the letters and redating of the paintings with letter extracts, most of which cost in the

region of £40-£50. All of these construct a linear, sequential narrative of VG's journey to death. The largest section of VG publications are those monographic studies simply entitled *Van Gogh*, with a portrait or self-portrait on the cover. These, with the proliferating essays of psychological and psycho-symbolic interpretations, far outnumber the relatively scarce studies of aspects of an artistic practice.

There are a number of historical factors that have made VG available for this appropriation, commencing with the reception and critical assessment of his work by Symbolist and Expressionist critics and artists, who first produced a 'Van Gogh' which would be a potential candidate for a place in art history. For instance, in Germany, the Expressionist movement took up the figure of VG not so much as an artistic resource, but as an artistic subject. He figured as hero in a novel like Meier Graefe's *Roman eines Göttsuchers* (1932) — and was subjected by authors and playwrights to dramatic characterization in accordance with their own ideological and aesthetic positions. Carl Sternheim, for instance, published a short story *Gauguin and Van Gogh* in 1924 to argue a position current in German Expressionism. But even in one of the very first critical essays in France on VG, published before his death in January 1890 by a Symbolist critic, Albert Aurier, one finds the shape of his now established historical *persona* critically prefigured. The article was influentially entitled: *Les Isolés — Vincent Van Gogh* and was published in the first issue of *Mercure de France* in 1890.

It is permissible to make certain deductions from his works about Vincent Van Gogh, about his temperament as a man, or rather as an artist — a deduction which I could corroborate from biographical details (if I wanted). What characterizes his whole work is excess, of force, excess of nervous energy, of violence in expression. In his categorical affirmation of the character of things, in his often fearless simplifications of forms, in his insolence in challenging the sun head-on, in the vehement expression of his drawings and of his colour, even to the least particulars of his technique, he reveals himself as powerful, a male, a daredevil, frequently brutal and sometimes ingeniously delicate. And even more, one can guess from the almost orgiastic expressiveness of everything he has painted, here is a man of exaltation, an enemy of bourgeois sobriety and minutiae, a sort of drunken giant, a terrible and maddened genius, often sublime, sometimes grotesque, always rising to a level that comes close to pathological states. [my emphasis]

It is possible to make a checklist from Aurier's article of

all the elements of the traditional myth of artist as mad genius. Aside from his own use of the term, there is 'excess', 'mania' and 'pathology'. These are coupled with the intention to find a biography and read the personality of this artistic subject off from the paintings in which it is so transparently expressed. Such a combination of myth and psychobiography not only informs later art historical readings but finds its fullest realization within what Hammacher calls *la vie romancée* — the fictional biography or the romanticized life — terms which distinguish the popular fiction from art historical narrative.

Attempts to dislodge these readings of VG as the paradigmatic figure of artist and mad genius encounter not only traditions of interpretation, lodged within the discursive practices of art history, but the wide dispersion of such myths, the whole ideological project typified by the construct VG throughout all these facets of production of a literature of art. A further constraint is publishing practice.

In 1978 a colleague, Fred Orton, and I were approached by Phaidon Press to write a short book on Van Gogh for their series on major artists and important movements. The initial title suggested by the publishers was *Van Gogh: The Tortured Sun*; our alternative was rather more prosaic: *Rooted in the Soil — A Van Gogh Primer*. We suggested that the cover illustration should bespeak the book's intention to mark a different reading of VG which was to examine more closely the major concerns of the work and reassess its intervention in the history of modern art. Yet the book was published (in September 1978) with a cover showing a *Self Portrait* and the title *Vincent Van Gogh, Artist of his Time*. The latter represented a major concession to our 'novel' suggestion that Van Gogh had lived and worked in a particular historical period and that this intriguing fact in some way pertained to our reading of his work. The decisions at Phaidon were not, we discovered, *editorial*. In order to sell yet another book on Van Gogh, the jacket and title had to conform to a brand identity and signify 'Van Gogh' — to present a recognizable and saleable commodity.

The opening words of our text made clear that we had laid aside biographic interests and considered his epileptic condition as irrelevant to the study of the work. However, we were sent a jacket blurb to proof which said that 'everyone knows that Van Gogh went mad and killed himself but here is a new interpretation of the artist's work'. In so far as we intended to provide an historical study of paintings and drawings in the form of a pictorial essay, a special distinction was drawn for our book by the

publishers between 'the man' and his 'art'. But his familiar identity as the mad genius was placed as a kind of frame within which our alternative approach could be situated and contained.

One of the most prestigious academic journals in art history is the *Burlington Magazine* and its section for reviews of current publications is significantly titled 'The Literature of Art'. There our book was reviewed in July 1979. The fact that we had attempted to locate VG within the historical moment 'of his time' presented considerable problems for the reviewer and necessitated a careful refutation:

Another recurrent theme in the essay is the notion that Vincent felt the 'need to assert a specific and increasingly anachronistic' (here a certain tendentiousness of thinking perhaps creeps in) 'view' of the necessary relations between men and the earth'. This is seen as what above all else marks the 'underlying thematic unity' of his whole career whether directly expressed as in the Potato Eaters or dialectically as in the British Museum's F 1424 with its 'old' horse drawn buggy and its little railway train. It would be unjust and unfair to complain unduly of what may be felt to be a somewhat Procrustean application of social-historical conceptualisations. The authors are able to adduce contemporary documentation; and have not the space to develop their argument, but the ex post facto is here hovering in the wings.

Such a passage assumes once again that any historicising or socialising analysis is extrinsic (what writing of history isn't *ex post facto*?) to the self-evident integrity of art works. We are told that VG's practice is not there to be studied as cultural production within historical conditions. However, the problem is that self-evidence, that givenness, the discrete integrity of art and artist, has, of course, to be produced, secured, and protected from those who argue for a history of artistic production, for art history as part of other histories, of the history of social relations and ideological representations.

Art history has to be recognized as a complex and paradoxical practice in which art is differentiated from all other areas of knowledge, secured by the positioning of a centre, the artist as the cause of all art. Art is distanced from history — produced as an autonomous, transcendental condition of human subjectivity and creativity. And, as importantly, art history is differentiated from all other discourses which attempt to reclaim art from that space and reconstitute it as a historically determined practice while deconstructing the centrality of the artist as subject

of and for the work of art. Art history lays claim to this terrain through particular operations. In the second section of this article I want to examine in detail a variety of art historical and non-art historical areas, to trace the dispersion of its ideologies in a network of overlapping discourses which offer guarantees to art history.

Van Gogh and the pathological syndrome

On July 29 1890 a Dutch painter named Vincent Van Gogh died from self-inflicted gunshot wounds. This event has determined the constructions of the artistic subject 'Van Gogh'. It is both the climax to and necessary closure of the narratives from which VG is produced. The suicide is taken to be an artificially significant event in terms of the artist who was both its agent and of whom it provides the explanation.

For some two or three years before July 1890 the Dutch painter is known to have suffered periodic fits during one of which he mutilated a small section of the lobe of his right ear. Speculations have been numerous on the nature and cause of these fits and associated actions. Because the painter spent a year in a mental asylum (May 1889-90) it has been readily assumed that VG was mentally ill. But in so far as the subject of this unspecified mental illness has been positioned as an artist, this madness, whether labelled schizophrenia, manic-depression or epilepsy, has been accommodated to and offered as support for a pre-existing artistic myth, that of mad genius.

In their book on the changing notions of the artist in European history since the sixteenth century, *Born Under Saturn* (Oxford 1963) R. and M. Wittkower provide a brief history of this category — including the Platonic idea of 'mania' — of artists as subject to an inspired and socially dangerous form of excessive behaviour, an unreasonable but creative madness which is synonymous with enthusiasm, and visionariness. They cite Seneca: 'There has never been great talent without a touch of madness' and Schopenhauer: 'Genius is nearer to madness than average intelligence'. But significantly, by the late nineteenth century, morbidity and death are added to the beliefs about the abnormal condition of great art, as in, for instance, an article in the *Popular Science Monthly* in 1893 entitled 'Genius and Suicide' in which we find 'that evidence is not lacking that genius is a mortal condition'. The main elements of this category of artist to whom is ascribed mania, inspiration, insanity or creatively disordered intelligence, eccentricity or dangerous and abnor-

mal behaviour, found new support in the modern period from the emergent discourses of psychiatry. But at the same time, in so far as there was already a category of madness associated with creativity, psychiatry could claim artists as subjects for their discourses. In the overlap of psychologies of creativity and art history the myth of the mad genius was reconstituted. The condition of art as akin to madness, as a socially disruptive force or a personally dangerous one is remade as *the* condition of the artist's creativity. The artistic *persona* takes precedence over either the private or the social *persona*. So in the case of VG, unspecified illness becomes doubly secured as artistic madness. It is treated not only as a facet of his artistness but a *confirmation* of it. Moreover the art, which of course arises from within this 'mad' artistic subject is examined not only for confirming signs of madness as a general condition of being an artist, but the particular styles and meanings of the art are seen to result exclusively from the maddened state of the producer. In some interpretations, this madness is presumed to be the cause of his creativity. So for instance, the sudden change to brilliant colour which occurred in his works after 1888, coincident with the first documented fits, is explained by the inspiring effect of 'descent' into madness.

A substantial area of the VG literature addressed VG from a psychiatric 'perspective' — what Hammacher labelled the 'pathological syndrome'. One of the first examples of this was published in 1922 by philosopher and psychiatrist, Karl Jaspers⁷. In the next decades books and articles proliferated. There are two main tendencies in the literature on the pathological syndrome. The first is an attempt to diagnose VG's mental illness by conflating periodic fits with his uninterrupted activity as a painter to secure the image of the mad genius, and the second reveals a desire to correlate the interpretation of his art with a specific psychosis.

Jaspers deduced that VG was schizophrenic. His diagnosis was based in part on the limited number of paintings he had seen but predominantly on translations of VG's letters. In order to confirm his diagnosis Jaspers called for the preparation of a comprehensive *catalogue raisonné* of the paintings and drawings of VG. He would then have a sound chronological framework which would enable him to chart the development of the psychosis. In the absence of such a tool, Jaspers nonetheless attempted to divide Van Gogh's works into stylistic periods, to analyse the characteristics of each stage of his production, and to establish the relationship between stylistic changes and the symp-

toms of schizophrenia.

The last months of Van Gogh's life were spent in a northern French village, Auvers, where his palette softened, and the paintings evidence a greater dependence on tonality, as opposed to colour, and new methods of drawing in colour emerged. However, from Jaspers' conviction that VG was suffering a deteriorating psychotic condition these changes were interpreted as impoverished, unsure and monotonous. Having established the overall pattern of the years 1888-90 within which he detected the progressive signs of schizophrenia, Jaspers concluded his study with a significant passage which reveals the interaction of early twentieth century analysis of schizophrenia with traditional ideas, generalized and mythic, about the creative relationship of madness and genius:

In fact, through its release of certain forces, the mental sickness allowed for the onset of a period of productivity which previously had been precluded. The sickness freed him from certain inhibitions, the unconscious began to play a greater role and the constrictions of civilization were cast aside. From this source as well, there developed certain similarities with dream experiences, with myths, and with the spiritual life of children... It is not only through this form of stimulation that an enhanced productivity is achieved, which also leads to the discovery of new means which are then added to the general artistic nomenclature, but also new powers are aroused. Such powers are, in themselves, intellectually viewed neither healthy nor sick, but they themselves flourish on the bedrock of sickness.

Jaspers links sickness with increased productivity, liberation, and imagination. Psychosis is connected with a particular kind of creativity — creativity perceived as a departure from the adult conscious norm, from civilized restraint, into the liberation of the unconscious — paralleling the child, the dream, the myth. It is both asocial and primitive.

In 1932 Françoise Minkowska disputed Jaspers' diagnosis. Following the opinions of his doctors in the South of France, Peyron and Rey, she concluded that VG suffered from epilepsy. Her analysis is, however, based more directly on his paintings (VG's doctors of course studied the patient who presented himself for treatment and whom they forbade, for the most part, to paint during the time he spent under their care). Teleological inevitability marks Minkowska's readings and so in the search for evidence to support her diagnosis she looked to the

pattern of his work, concluding thus her discussion of what she took to be his last painting:

Without doubt, in this his final work, the artist had given striking symbolic expression to opposing, inner forces. In our own prosaic manner we can say that these two movements, one of elevation and one of fall, form the structural basis of the epileptic manifestations, just as the two polarities form the base of the epileptoid condition.⁸

In her formal analysis of the paintings she perceives signs which parallel the epileptic condition she assigns to the artist. In opposition to Jaspers, Minkowska does not seek to establish periodisation and stylistic change. Epilepsy is not progressive or deteriorating. Instead she tries to isolate a psychotic condition in the structural and compositional elements of one and all of his paintings. However, both these authors concur more than they differ. Minkowska and Jaspers' choice of diagnosis is determined on the basis of presumed characteristics of VG's art. Further, the psychiatric readings, however different in conclusion, both echo typical art historical procedures — periodization, chronology, or formalist analysis. They both attempt to establish parallels between the nature of art and the condition of psychosis. Finally both accept that art and psychosis are not only compatible but reflexive — the latter being responsible for the emergence of a distinctive and individual artistic character — VG's style.

This process by which all potentially disparate or conflicting elements of the life and work of VG are unified and rendered coherent is exemplified in another indicative passage from Minkowska:

The life, the psychosis, the oeuvre of Van Gogh form an indivisible unity. Thus, I am unable to speak of a basic stylistic change. In this instance psychosis has not destroyed or modified anything profoundly. In its liberating role, it adds a new note by embodying at its summit the inner tragedy of the artist. [my emphasis]

The specific identity of and categorical distinctions between the social and historical circumstance of an individual's life (Life), the production and meanings of objects, paintings and drawings (*oeuvre*), the intrusive, disruptive and non-productive force of mental illness (psychosis) are thus effaced. Like Jaspers, Minkowska sees VG's condition as liberating and productive, but she adds a new effect — revelation. The unity of life and work that is asserted and the positive effect attributed to the psychosis on that life and work serve a common function, to give access to the

inner tragedy of the artist, and thus to make visible the organising subjectivity of the artist.

Such texts can both be criticized for the inadequacy and lack of rigour in diagnoses as well as for the invocation of mythic notions about the artist. But what is most striking and relevant for my purposes is the correspondence between the psychiatric analysis of an artist and the typical modes of art history. The premises may differ but the effects are not dissimilar — a chronological and in some cases teleological approach, the reading of paintings for the signs of the artist, the production of the artistic subject from the traces of his work, the unification of all experiences and products of an historical individual, Van Gogh, as the seamless unity of the artist.

An accurate diagnosis of the condition from which the Dutch painter suffered is necessary, not because I am suggesting that there is a real and different VG to be reclaimed from the myth, nor because I am simply suggesting that these authors did not do their research properly, but for the reason that on the terrain of biography or, more correctly, psychobiography, within which that Van Gogh is constituted, historical material can be adduced which categorically disallows the kind of totalisation that is the project and effect of this literature.

The doctors Rey and Peyron, first in the hospital at Arles and later in the clinic at St Rémy, consistently believed that Van Gogh was an epileptic.⁹ In letters to his family and particularly his brother Theo, Van Gogh exhibited considerable interest in this condition. These texts, as documents, were available to earlier writers and their words are decisive. According to them the attacks were clearly terrifying and disturbing experiences. But in a letter from the asylum of 1889 (LT 592) Van Gogh wrote that the doctors had been reassuring. Not only did others experience the hallucinations and hearing of voices but had been known to injure themselves in a similar manner; one epileptic had also attacked his own ear. Some months later Van Gogh wrote:

I think Dr Peyron is right when he says that I am not strictly mad for my mind is absolutely normal in the intervals, even more so than before. But during the attacks it is terrible, then I lose consciousness of everything. But that spurs me on to work and to seriousness, like a miner who is always in danger and makes haste in what he does. (LT 610, October 1889).

Recent research has supported this contemporary diagnosis, which has always been recognized by those not

involved directly in the VG industry. However, two forms of epilepsy have been suggested: some believe that Van Gogh suffered from what is known as psycho-motor epilepsy, probably caused by slight brain damage at birth; a recent essay by Margaret Ochocki¹⁰ convincingly argued that VG may have developed symptomatic epilepsy through his consumption of absinthe, which VG first encountered when he moved to Paris in 1886. He was known to take it in vast quantities as a substitute for food during his time in Arles (1888-9). In both psycho-motor and symptomatic epilepsy the effects are similar, that is to say, periodic and intense attacks of a few minutes' duration, preceded by seconds or minutes during which perceptions and sensations may undergo a change, succeeded by longer periods of lethargy and exhaustion lasting perhaps a month at the most and followed by complete recovery. Between 1887 and 1890 Van Gogh suffered approximately seven fits, some of which were experienced only as spells of faintness.¹¹ Their incidence is therefore confined to a brief period in his mid-thirties. They were of limited duration and occurred in some cases only on visits from the asylum to Arles where VG may well have drunk absinthe. It is also worth noting, as Ochocki does, that the common treatment in the late nineteenth century was the prescription of bromide, itself now known to be a possible inciter of epileptic attacks. Bromide can accumulate in the body and contribute to a later development of 'nervous disorders' after the treatment has ceased.

Such knowledge of the poisonous nature of absinthe or the deleterious effects of bromide, which we now have, was not current in the nineteenth century although the connection between alcohol and epilepsy is hinted at in one of VG's letters (LT 585). The ways in which VG and his doctors could make sense of or represent this condition were therefore historically specific and the term that recurs is that of a 'nervous condition'. VG himself was positioned within historical practices and discourses which proposed some correspondences between abnormal conditions, excess and the practice of art, or the life of an artist. It is not surprising that Van Gogh should have taken note of an article in *Le Figaro* about another artist who suffered from a 'nervous condition' which is now known to have been psycho-motor epilepsy, namely the Russian author, Dostoyevsky. In a novel, *The Idiot* (1868) Dostoyevsky offered a representation of the condition of psycho-motor epilepsy through the character of Prince Mishkin. At one point in the novel this character is given an interior monologue in which he tries to describe the

state that occurred just prior to the onset of an epileptic fit. It is worth quoting from:

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*Madness and art
history*

He was thinking, incidentally, that there was a moment or two in his epileptic conditions almost before the fit itself... when suddenly amid the sadness, the spiritual darkness and depression, his brain seemed to catch fire at brief moments, and with an extraordinary momentum his vital forces were strained to the utmost all at once. His sensation of being alive and his awareness increased tenfold at those moments which flashed by like lightning... All his agitation, all his doubts and worries seemed composed in a twinkling, culminating in a great calm, full of serene and harmonious joy and hope, full of understanding and the knowledge of the final cause... for it was not abnormal and fantastic visions he saw at that moment, as under the influence of hashish, opium or spirits, which debased the reason and distorted the mind. He could reason sanely about it when the attack was over and he was well again. Those moments were merely an intense heightening of awareness — if this condition had to be expressed in a word — of awareness and at the same time of the most direct sensation of one's own existence to the most intense degree.

Such a representation does not offer us a truth about epilepsy, but a way of reading it which points to a very different set of possibilities with regard to VG and the epileptic condition. It is absolutely impossible to determine what use VG may have made of the visions he may have had preceding the onset of one of the few fits he endured. Such representations as we do have in the texts of the letters tend to correspond with Dostoyevsky's picture of brief moments which could be reconsidered and reworked during the prevailing periods of lucidity and calm. VG's letters speak of other kinds of experiences, religious visions, for instance, which he found loathsome and rejected, or times when a fit came on but he was able to complete a painting on which he was working before unconsciousness overcame him. It is unwarrantable, however, to argue that the condition determined what or how he painted. VG cannot be positioned as mad in the sense of a continuous or progressive alteration of mental states; but as epileptic Van Gogh was subject to rare but periodic inconveniences (terrifying as the onset of a fit may have been), of attacks which rendered him momentarily unconscious, exhausted and *unable to paint* until the effects wore off.

Such arguments and alternative readings, however, are not sufficient to refute the construction of Van Gogh as mad artist, precisely because the base of that construction is neither clinical pathology nor readings of historical

evidence. The pathological syndrome is both a support for and arises within the dominant narrative and psychobiographical structures of the literature we call art history.

Ways of reading

I mentioned earlier that Karl Jaspers' interpretation of VG called for the production of a *catalogue raisonné*, the chronological ordering of the complete works which could provide access to the psychic and artistic profile of VG. In the majority of studies of VG general discussion of his crises of fits is subsumed into an exclusive concentration on the two most *dramatic* incidents, posed as revealing self-mutilations. In one, a small section of an ear lobe (*not* the whole ear) was sliced at the height of a crisis in December 1888. The other is the quiet and determined suicide which has been constructed from the act of shooting himself in the stomach in July 1890.

An article in *Horizon*¹² put forward a quite convincing argument that VG would not have died had a doctor been called in time. Morgan, rather unwarrantably, points the

2. Long Grass with Butterflies (1890?)



finger at the homeopathic doctor Gachet, under whose auspices VG was staying in Auvers, for not having brought in proper medical treatment for what were not fatal gunshot wounds. It has always been assumed that Van Gogh shot himself in the lower lungs or stomach and not his heart because of the disturbed and therefore incompetent state he was in. But it is not beyond the bounds of reasonable conjecture that VG actually shot himself, not to kill himself, but to bind his brother and sole source of financial support to him more closely, to blackmail him as he had done many times before in order to ensure VG's own financial security. His death may have been no more than a fatal mistake.

However, these two disparate and probably inexplicable events provide material for the myth. They are conflated to signify the suffering and madness of the artist. They have become vital clues to the interpretation of his painting, because his madness is subsumed into the fact of his being an artist. But since this suicide put an end to his painting as well as to his life it has been necessary to rewrite the narrative of Van Gogh's artistic practice as leading inevitably towards that death.

In order to explore the ramifications of the above I want to look at the one painting by VG that occupies a crucial place in the literature on VG, serving as the visual and psychological climax of art historical, fictional, filmic representations of his life and work.

There is only one painting by Van Gogh (known as *Crows over the Wheatfields* Amsterdam Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh) that immediately offers itself for misrecognition as symbolic of personal anguish, psychological dissolution and loss of power. Until a relatively recent thesis established a correct dating of the paintings of VG's last months, this one painting was universally assumed to be the last work and testament.¹⁵ Indeed so over-determined was this work that it was used to signify Van Gogh on the cover of the 1970 *catalogue raisonné*. It was, in fact, painted in the first week of July 1890 and not on July 27, the date on which he wounded himself, two days before he bled to death. The last major Van Gogh exhibition in England was held in the Hayward Gallery in 1968. The sequence of the hanging was not only strictly chronological but dramatic in its effects. The visitor was taken on a journey through VG's life and struggle and the exhibition concluded with two canvases, one of which was *Crows over the Wheatfields* for which the catalogue entry disingenuously reads:

This painting is not in fact Vincent's last work, though the force of the imagery makes it appropriate for the position.

To give some impression of the kind of exegesis to which this painting has been subjected I quote three examples from different kinds of literature.

Françoise Minkowska¹⁴

There is here a heavy and menacing sky which weighs down upon the earth, as if wishing to crush it. The field of wheat moves tumultuously as if wishing to escape the embrace of the hostile force watching over it. It makes a desperate attempt to raise itself towards the sky, but the descending black crows accentuate further the imminence of destruction, the fall, the annihilation. Everything is engulfed in the inevitable shock. All resistance is useless. Van Gogh put an end to his life and work.

'The World of Van Gogh' Time and Life Books (1968)

*The sky is a deep and angry blue that overpowers the two clouds on the horizon. The foreground is an ill-defined crossroads. The wheat itself rises like an angry sky to contend with the stormy sky. In this picture Van Gogh painted what he must have felt — the world was closing in on him and the roads of escape were blocked. (caption to reproduction of *Crows over the Wheatfields*).*

Meyer Schapiro 'On a Painting of Van Gogh'¹⁵

*In the *Crows over the Wheatfields* these centres have fallen apart... the great shining sun has broken up into a dark and scattered mass without a centre, the black crows which advance from the horizon towards the foreground, reversing in their approach the spectator's normal passage into the distance; he is, so to speak, their focus, their vanishing point. In their zigzag lines they approximate with increasing evidence the unstable wavy form of the three roads, uniting on one transverse movement the contrary directions of the human paths and the sinister flock. But the stable, familiar earth, interlocked with the paths, seems to resist perspective control. The artist's will is confused, the world moves towards him, he cannot move towards the world. It is as if he felt himself completely blocked, but also saw an ominous fate approaching.*

Meyer Schapiro occupies an interesting position in art history — he wrote for the left-wing magazine *Partisan Review* in the 1930s, has published articles on the semiological analysis of medieval art and is now enjoying somewhat belated reappraisal in both marxist and establishment art historical circles. In 1953 he published an article in *Anthropology Today* entitled 'Style' in which he assessed the range of positions in the analysis of artistic style

and his concluding section on 'explanations of style by forms of social life' based on a development of marxist theory is that which he himself endorsed in this text:

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Only broadly sketched in Marx's work, the theory has rarely been applied systematically in a true spirit of investigation such as we see in Marx's economic writings... A theory of style adequate to the psychological and historical problem has still to be created. It waits for a deeper knowledge of the principles of form, construction and expression and for a unified theory of the processes of social life in which the practical means of life as well as emotional behaviour are compromised.

It is therefore pertinent to examine Schapiro's text not only as a representative academic art historical text. Its significance lies in the fact that in the work of this art historian, who can be claimed for a position within the attempted development of a marxist art history, we can detect the operations of those tendencies in art history which I have indicated as categorically opposed to a marxist conception of history and artistic production.

The article opens thus:

Among Van Gogh's paintings the Crows over the Wheatfields is for me the deepest avowal. It was painted a few days before his suicide, and in the letter in which he speaks of it we recognise the same mood as in the picture.

As an art historian concerned with the principles of style, form and expression, Schapiro's subsequent discussion of the painting begins with an outline of the syntax of the work; he attends to its construction — the disrupted perspective, the organisation of colour and the animated facture (that is the mode of application of paint and its effects). He initially remarks upon the format of the canvas used, a doublesquare format measuring 50 × 100 cm. He finds the shape strange, causing a disturbing inversion of the perspective lines. The doublesquare 50 × 100 canvas was, in fact, the most *typical* of Van Gogh's canvas sizes in the period during which *Crows over the Wheatfields* was painted (see for example F 770, F 771, F 772, F 773, F 775, F 776, F 777, F 779). Also canvases were by this date mass-produced, their sizes determined by production processes.

Schapiro further draws attention to the colour sequence but he presents it as 'symbolic' of defensive enumeration, an exertion of control over Van Gogh's experience of personal disintegration. Moreover Schapiro tries to locate the painting in the context of VG's letters of the period in which the work is discussed. He has to admit that there is some discrepancy between his anxiety-ridden interpreta-

tion and VG's statement about the painting's purpose — to show the restorative forces he perceived in the country while painting the picture. The explanation proposed by Schapiro runs like this: faced with his personal experience of disintegration, symbolized by the 'pathetic disarray' of the perspective in the canvas, Van Gogh used painting as a means of defending himself against his own fears:

Just as a man in neurotic distress counts and enumerates to hold onto things securely and to fight a compulsion, Van Gogh in his extremity of anguish discovers an arithmetical order of colours and shapes to resist decomposition.

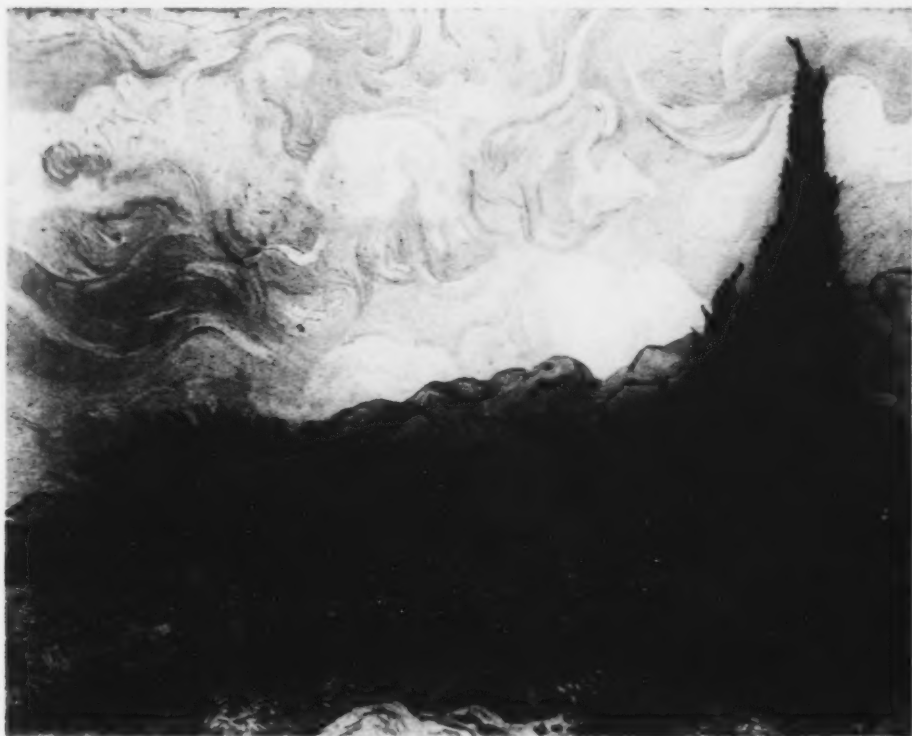
Painting is presented as a cathartic process, through which the painter defends himself against himself. VG's painting, according to Schapiro, was an act of high intelligence which forestalled the oncoming collapse. Until 'In the end his despair destroyed him', Schapiro's analysis is more penetrating, the language of formal analysis and interpretation is more sophisticated than the direct expressionist reading in the *Time-Life* book. The art historian introduces a problem, however. He allows for paradox, even for disjunctures, but only on the superficial level of apparent conflicts of the evidence. He proffers more knowledge. He searches back into earlier periods to find how VG viewed the act of painting. But nonetheless Schapiro's account is merely a more compelling and sustained investigation into and presentation of the artist's subjectivity. For although VG's art and state of mind are placed in a different relationship (for instance, he is presented as neurotic and tormented, a man more like other men, rather than beyond the edge of reason; his art is the site of VG's resistance to himself) it is still VG's despair, unexamined and safely couched in the seductive language of emotional excess that destroys the artist and therefore explains this painting. Not only is the work once again bound back into the subjectivity of VG, but the work itself serves as its index and revelation. The meaning of the painting results exclusively from psychological causes within VG as revealed by a parallel investigation of other paintings and verbal texts for such symptoms.

So what else could we find in the painting, what other 'VG'? What I want to propose is not merely another 'interpretation', nor a sign by sign analysis of the elements, colour, size, perspective, crows, wheatfields, the country and so on. Rather I want to disrupt and counter these dominant 'expressionist', 'symbolic', 'sentimentalist' —

interpretations based on narrative and biographical modes of interpretative criticism and provide some suggestions for the ways in which one can locate art historical work on Van Gogh. Instead of offering the paintings to be consumed as articulations of a personality, they have to be located as practices within historically determined and therefore class constituted positions. The search for unities has to be abandoned.

Crows over the Wheatfields was produced in the early months of July 1890, by the painter Van Gogh. But, apart from the paintings, Van Gogh also wrote an extended body of texts in the form of letters addressed to his brother Theo Van Gogh, an art dealer in Paris and sole source of financial support for VG's continuing practice as a painter. These texts are a supporting discourse produced by the painter within the uncertain conditions of art practice in late nineteenth century Europe. In them the work of VG as painter is represented by Van Gogh the writer. They can be read, not as direct historical evidence for the paintings, but as parallel historical texts which are part of a network of practices and representations. Inevitably they provide information from which the account I can provide is

3. Corn field with
Cypresses (1889)



drawn; in doing so I have used a 'historical' mode of writing but it should be clear that the presence of an already constituted account, so full, so seductive, so reflexive creates real problems in writing or speaking about VG. But without these texts the history we could write would be different and VG would be a very different sort of figure in art historical discourses.

Crows over the Wheatfields is dated to early July 1890. In the last weeks of June, VG had visited Paris to see his brother and family. Theo was on the verge of a nervous collapse, partly as a result of a renewed phase of difficulties with his employers, the large Parisian firm, Boussod et Valadon & Cie who saw little profit in patronage of unsaleable artists with whom Theo Van Gogh was commercially engaged, and also as a result of early symptoms of the general paralysis of the insane that finally killed him in 1891. Theo Van Gogh was the sole financial support for his wife, young son and VG himself, and also sent money to members of his family in Holland. His son was ill, his job was in jeopardy. VG returned to Auvers extremely worried about his own future. See, for instance, LT 640 after a visit to Paris in early July:

Back here I still feel very sad and continue to feel the storm which threatens you weighing on me. What is to be done — you see I generally try to be cheerful, but my life is also threatened at the very roots, my steps are also wavering. [My emphasis.]

Note the construction intended to ingratiate himself with Theo but ensure that Theo is aware of the implications for him, Vincent. VG painted three canvases shortly after his return to Auvers, all on the same doublesquare format, two of which were called *Vast Fields of Wheat under Troubled Skies*. (F 778 and F 779 Amsterdam Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh) and the third he called *Daubigny's Garden* (F 776 or 777 New York Kramarsky Trust or Basle Öffentliche Kunstsammlung) the garden of the house in which the French 'Barbizon' landscape painter Charles Daubigny (1817-1878) had lived and worked in Auvers. All three paintings are about 50 × 100 cm. The painting F 779 is more commonly known as *Crows over the Wheatfields*.

Writing to Theo of these canvases, on 9 July VG stated:

They are vast stretches of wheat under troubled skies and I did not need to go out of my way to express sadness and extreme loneliness. I hope you will see them soon — for I hope to bring them to Paris as soon as possible, since I almost think that these canvases will say what I cannot

All three paintings were painted for his brother. The letter invites Theo to be moved by the 'sadness and loneliness' that he, *Vincent*, was experiencing. The painting was addressed to Theo in a language which Theo, who had been subjected to Van Gogh's cryptic and metaphoric verbal and visual communications for ten years, was meant to decode as both a warning and an invitation.

One could call wheatfields a 'major sign' in VG's *oeuvre*. He painted twelve canvases of them in June-July 1890 alone; 20 in the previous summer in St Rémy, 12 in 1888 in Arles, and from the Dutch years 1883-1885 they are very numerous. One of the first was painted in Drenthe, a remote Northern province in Holland, in the autumn of 1883, when Theo once before threatened to give up his job, and 'abandon' Vincent to his own fortunes; when Van Gogh first decided that he was a painter and made his first essays in the painting of landscape in the manner of Daubigny.

A few general remarks about paintings and drawings of wheatfields will provide a working picture. Many of them have a high horizon line, some show storms of rain slashing across the wheat or corn, others place flocks of birds over the fields. All these devices are part of VG's rather unsuccessful attempt to master the established language of picturesque landscape painting. They also belong to his major project as an artist, derived from the positions he took up in Drenthe in 1883, that the painting of the life and work and seasonal rhythms of the country in the manner of Millet and other French landscape painters was the core of modern art. See LT 418 July 1885:

Just think over whether you do not find this true. They started with peasant's or labourer's figure as 'genre', but at the present, with Millet the great master as leader, this is the very core of modern art.

and W 4 1889, about Barbizon painters as the true modern artists and continuing leaders of European art, and LT 593 on 'the eternal youth and unsurpassed example' of Barbizon painters.

So wheatfields belong in a wide context of cycles of paintings in which seasons are signified by typical forms of agricultural work associated with them and reintroduced into nineteenth century modes of representation through painters like Millet and the novelist Zola. Especially in the novel *La Terre* (1888) Zola attached metaphorical significance to agricultural tasks as signs of growth, life and

death, signifiers in a cyclical conception of human life and society. For VG, for instance, the wheatfield with reaper signified the yearly death of the harvest and therefore of humanity (LT 617), while the sower was his biblical opposite. VG's enterprises in this mode stem directly from the use he made of the series of wood engravings of the *Twelve Labours of the Field* and *Four Hours of the Day* by Millet, which VG copied as a preliminary exercise in drawing in 1880-81 and to which he had returned in the autumn of 1889. By that date in addition to reworking the wood engravings in the medium of oil painting he had copied a print of a painting by Millet *The Harrow* (F 632) which shows a vast, desolate and empty field under snow over which a flock of crows are wheeling. The painting included cornstalks and a darkening sky. Direct copies occur relatively rarely in Van Gogh's work. When they do, they serve an explicit purpose to reassert an allegiance to the work of certain artists whom VG took to be the key figures in a tradition of painting he wanted to revive and continue. It is rather more common to find an intentional utilization of motifs which activate reference to paintings and the positions occupied by the painters. These artists' work not only provided VG with a model for his own work and its subject matter. They were invoked and reworked as part of his attempt to retrieve the meanings, and indirectly the conditions, of social life proposed through forms of painting that had arisen prior to capitalist industrialization.

It is important to consider VG's position within the class structure of Dutch society in the late nineteenth century. The old civic bourgeoisie or burgher class had assumed political, economic and social dominance in the United Provinces (now called the Netherlands) with the development of mercantile capitalism in the seventeenth century. In the nineteenth century this civic patriciate opposed industrialization (railways and early industry in the Netherlands were financed largely by foreign capital) and modernization (national integration of the provinces). The complex manoeuvres in both VG's paintings and letters have to be read with reference to the conflicts within the *bourgeoisies* of the Netherlands in the second half of the nineteenth century. Liberal bourgeois elements were in government after the revision of the constitution in 1848. It is clear from innumerable letters that VG perceived these elements as leading Holland into decline and decadence. He aligned himself with the traditional civic burgher ruling class whose dominance and interests were being challenged economically and politically both from within

the Netherlands as well as from international capitalism.

Misrecognition of these determinations coupled with the refusal of the notion of class as a structural determinant has allowed VG's use of 'Millet' as a model and the agricultural labour in subject matter represented by what he called 'peasant painting' to be assimilated to humanist

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4. Chair and Pipe
(1888?)



bourgeois interpretations such as that proposed by Schapiro of another famous signifier of VG, *The Potato Eaters* (Amsterdam Rijksmuseum Van Gogh) of which he wrote:

Conceived as a summation of Van Gogh's work and study up to that time (1885), it also expresses most strongly his social and moral feelings. He was a painter of peasants, not for the sake of their picturesqueness — although he was moved by their whole aspect — but from a deep affinity and solidarity with poor people, whose lives, like his own, were burdened with care.

In addition to the use of emotional explanation so firmly reinforced by the language of this passage, one sees at work here the processes of binding the work and the artist together by proposing a unity of interests between the artist and the fictions of his own work, who are taken (mistaken) for real people, real peasants rather than as images produced by a bourgeois painter using members of the rural proletariat who modelled for money during periods of prolonged unemployment. This process is even more apparent in a Schapiro passage on a painting of a weaver at a loom from the same text:

Van Gogh gave to the image of the worker at the machine a high solemnity and power. In the earnest skilful weaver, he felt, no doubt, a kinship with his own artistic work.

VG's reworking of systems of representation available in the late nineteenth century, using prints of paintings by Millet, paintings by Daubigny and so on, in combination with VG's practice of painting directly from the motif and the model, produced contradictions and disjunctures in his practice. When he set up his easel in front of a scene, VG saw that scene both in terms of modes of representation current fifty and even two hundred years previously (seventeenth century Dutch art). He painted the scene before him in order that it might represent his own civic, mercantilist bourgeois reaction to 'progress' and modern urban society. However, he encountered great difficulties as a result of this. The paintings rarely worked to represent that position, and in doubt Van Gogh reverted to virtual imitation of such painter's work as he *could* reproduce. One of these was Daubigny, who had lived and worked in Auvers and who painted broad fields of corn on wide horizontal canvases, usually in a *doublesquare* format (100 × 200 cm) with high horizon lines, compressed space, shallow depth of field. There are for instance two paintings now in the Kroeller-Mueller Museum in Otterlo entitled *Cornfield Under a Stormy Sky* and *Young Corn*. In

the former a path leads centrally into the fields of corn only to disappear in their midst. In the latter the painting is divided in the centre horizontally between heavy sky and billowing wheat and a path enters the field centrally but disappears into it while to either side rough, unsown ground skirts the field to be closed off by the stalks of the growing corn. In 1873 Daubigny had exhibited at the Paris Salon, which Van Gogh had visited, a vast and snowy scene entitled simply *Snow of Winter* (100 × 200 cm) (Paris, Louvre). There, in a vast and empty expanse of snow-covered ground, a dark clump of trees stand out and a flock of crows roost in their bare branches or peck the frozen earth beneath. Van Gogh associated flocks of crows with both Daubigny and Millet, for in a letter of September 1880 he had written of a winter scene in Belgium,

I also noticed flocks of crows made famous in the paintings of Daubigny and Millet. (LT 156.)

Crows and wheatfields had not only an extensive context within Van Gogh's practice, but a purpose within his vocabulary and a place within the representational formula of a particular group of late nineteenth century painters. In dwelling on these motifs I am hoping to indicate something of the complexity of a single Van Gogh painting, the multiplicity and potential range of meanings signified by a few motifs within one such landscape; a set of resonances which has to be unravelled across a variety of texts and within a reconstruction of VG's highly ambitious and problematic project as an artist in the 1880's in France and Holland. In order to return to the painting in question it is necessary to place VG's use of landscape painting in relation to the signification of the city for him, as centre of speculative commerce in opposition to the organic, natural world. In a letter of October 1883, Van Gogh had written to Theo one of many diatribes against the city in the hope of persuading Theo not to emigrate to America but join him in the country and become a painter. The argument was posed in the idealist terms of Nature opposed to the city, signifying modern urban industrial society, and characterized above all by a market economy. He was thus attempting to persuade Theo to leave the world of dealing and speculation in the art market and partake in the great Carlylian worship of supernatural nature.

Van Gogh read Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1831) in 1883, from which he derived the vocabulary for articulating his idealist and pantheistic conceptions of

nature, and within which he remained fixed until the last years, painting, for instance, the famous *Starry Night* (1889 F 612 New York Museum of Modern Art) according to Carlyle's prescriptive symbolism:

Then sawest thou this fair Universe, were it the meanest province thereof, is in very deed the star-domed city of God; that through every star and every blade of grass, and most through every living soul, the glory of a present God still beams. But Nature, which is the Time-Vesture of God, and reveals Him to the Wise, hides Him from the foolish.

In LT 332 of 1883, this formulation occurs:

If at the same time you wandered through the cornfields and moors, to renew what you yourself express as 'I used to feel part of nature; now I do not feel that way any longer'. Let me tell you, brother, that I myself experience so deeply, so very deeply what you say there. That I have been through a period of nervous, arid overstraining — there were days when I could not see anything in the most beautiful landscape just because I did not feel part of it. It is the street and the office and the care and the nerves that make it so.

Rural analogies were adopted and adapted for a longing to return to an eternal order, signified by the idea of nature. In a later letter to Theo we find:

But in order to grow you must be rooted in the earth. So I tell you don't wither on the sidewalk. You will say there are plants that grow in the city — that may be but you are corn and your place is in the cornfield. (LT 336.)

In VG's letters one finds a wealth of material which throws light on the events of June 1890 and suggests a way of reading the 'statement' made by a painting of crows over a wheatfield accompanied by a letter, both addressed to Theo. Both were intended to convey 'the health and restorative forces' of the country.

In the letters of the later part of July 1890 up to and including the one apparently found on VG after his death, the difficulty of relations between living artists and the dealers in 'dead artists' was repeatedly addressed. VG constructed Theo as a different kind of dealer, stressing his unique and 'creative' contribution to the making of modern art, namely the work of VG himself, through his continuing financial support. However, the letters suggest that VG represented these difficult conditions of art practice to himself in terms of public misunderstanding, ideologies of vanguardism and the search for what he

called 'sympathetic' lovers of art. A previous threat of withdrawal of Theo's financial support had occurred in 1883 and in the letters of autumn 1883 the absurd ignorance of public opinion on art is compared to the croaking of ravens. (LT 339). I am not suggesting that crows or ravens or any other birds of prey simply equal dealers of 'absurd' public opinion — that would be to collapse the letters into the paintings — but such a conjunction of concerns and metaphors throws light on the network of signs and meanings which structured VG's texts and which must condition the way we make readings of VG paintings. At the same time, it points to the problems that were inherent in the artist's attempts to produce meaning through the signifying process of painting in and against the signifying processes of writing. The painting, *Crows over the Wheatfields* of July 1890, far from being presented, therefore, as the culminating climax of a sequential narrative, the revelation of the artist, has to be approached as a complicated text, which calls for a different kind of work, not of narration or interpretation, but decoding. Attention has to be paid to broad fields of nineteenth century discourse, to the conditions of production, to practices of representation which are not coherent, legible or consistent but uncertain, and contradictory.

'Lust for Life' — artist and media

Despite the resistance by art history to the production of discourses outside of its privileged place in the literature of art, particular discursive structures, both narrative and psychobiographical, are common to both the texts of *la vie romanceé*, the popular fictional biography, and art history. It is perhaps the coincidence of narrative structures which render art history and Stone's novel *Lust for Life* translatable into filmic narrative. In this section I want to consider the construction of Van Gogh in another site of the production of representations of the artist, the film, *Lust for Life*. This was directed by Vincente Minnelli in 1955 for MGM with Kirk Douglas in the lead role. It was based upon Stone's novel, one of the prime texts in Hammacher's category, *la vie romanceé*, the popular fictive biography. At the same time, the film *Lust for Life* operates in a different area of consumption and can therefore be examined as an example of dispersion of the effects of art historical discourse.

MGM had bought the film rights to Stone's novel but the option was due to expire in December 1955. Stone, anticipating the revocation of the rights, was already

planning a film version of his own, as was Kirk Douglas who was preparing, through his own production company, a film on Van Gogh's life in which he would star. The film was in fact made by MGM in 5 months between June and December 1955 and was released in 1956.¹⁶

Minnelli believed Van Gogh had been hereditarily insane and saw motifs in his work as symbols. The sun, for instance, was a symbol of the repressed turmoil of the 'maelstrom he was always fighting'. Such a reading served to set Van Gogh apart while subjecting him to voyeuristic representation — the artist as irrecoverably mad and driven towards self-destruction while the art remains as his testament of struggle — echoing that reading made by Schapiro discussed above. It is hardly surprising to find that the culminating climax of the film is a representation of Van Gogh shooting himself in the wheatfield as he tries to paint *Crows over the Wheatfields*.

According to Minnelli the film received the best reviews of any of his pictures. *Time* magazine concluded that it was 'Hollywood's most profound exploration of artistic life'. Indeed the film was sold as a biography, collapsing the artistic work into personality. The *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote 'something of a Van Gogh painting inhabits this sincere and absorbing biography of that strange and disturbed man'. Such an effect was no doubt strengthened by all the meanings the star Kirk Douglas brought into the visual reconstruction of Van Gogh and it is tempting to recall in relation to Douglas' screen *persona*, Aurier's words describing Van Gogh: Powerful, a male, a daredevil frequently brutal, sometimes ingenuously delicate'.

Dissenting voices were raised however — the *Time* critic took issue with the Minnelli presentation of VG as mad, commenting that VG was known to be epileptic, adding, 'Van Gogh's epilepsy halted his painting but does not explain it'. This critic also draws attention to effects of the narrative necessities and drives of the filmic process:

The film captures the fierce drive and bitter tragedy of the life of Van Gogh... But because the Hollywood story builds relentlessly to Van Gogh's ear slicing for its climax... Lust for Life falls midway between being a first rate art film and a high pitched melodrama.

In Minnelli's film the narrative economy of the film drives towards the climax of self-mutilation and release through the death which is anticipated by a series of personal rejections and physical sufferings and mutilations. It lingers over the minor incident in which VG is said to have put his hand into a flame to prove the durability of his love

for his cousin, draws out the suspense of VG's dramatic attempt on Gauguin's life, situates the build up to the cutting of his own ear through brutal music and lush, reddened colour. Just prior to that event, Van Gogh/Douglas is placed before a mirror so that his attack on himself is constituted as a rejection of himself by himself. His final releasing act of suicide is located within one of his own paintings, the wheatfields with the crows. His last words as he dies are 'I want to go home', a phrase which not only effects the closure of his life but the filmic narrative; it releases him and the audience.

The film tries to visualise VG's life in terms of his paintings. We are shown reconstructions of scenes he painted. They are not only offered to us as he painted them, without any suggestion of mediating practice, but serve to render transparent this same process of mystification of production with regard to the film's construction. On the one hand we see him opening a window in Arles onto an orchard in blossom which dissolves into VG paintings of blossoms, as if they were no more than his inner mental images as he looked at the scene and not *representations* made of a scene. Alternatively his paintings are carefully and faithfully reconstructed as *sets*, so that Van Gogh becomes virtually a figure in his own paintings. Much is made of his sitting like one of the all-night prowlers in the reddened interior of the *Night Café* (F 463 New Haven Yale University Art Gallery), a painting *à propos* of which he, the fascinated bourgeois *flâneur* in working class haunts, stated that it was a place one (but not we the bourgeois) could go mad in. The film 'places' VG, eliding his imputed state of mind with his own paintings, refusing to recognize those works as representation and as practice — realizing in full the effects of the written texts on VG.

In the text already quoted Schapiro made much of the disturbing perspective he thought he saw in the *Crows over the Wheatfields* painting. Marks in the painting which signify birds are spoken of as if they were real animate birds flying around the painting, yet simultaneously operate on a connotational level as harbingers of death (Schapiro refers to these birds as 'figures of death'). The effect is apparently produced by distortion of single point perspective, or its reversal. Within the realist conventions of the film *Lust for Life* such illusions of real objects in motion can be produced, and the photographic single-point perspective systems operate to direct this represented motion towards the spectator of the film. In the penultimate episode of the film Van Gogh/Kirk Douglas is

shown painting this painting, a scene of extensive wheat-fields around which crows are hovering. His work as a painter is thus presented at one level as direct transcription from a real scene. Suddenly, however, the crows move in, but not towards the spectator. They close in on the figure of Van Gogh whom they harass and attack. The artist is positioned as the object of the attack. The effect of this is to contain the attack within the perspective system of the film and to shift a scene of painter and motif into a different connotative reading — to signify VG's disturbed state, to make the signs of his paintings the signifiers of his mental condition which is then played out, dramatically. Van Gogh gives up his painting and, scribbling a note which reads (roughly) 'I cannot take any more' shoots himself.

In *Lust for Life*, the spectator is positioned as viewer of pictures produced by photographic representations through which Van Gogh is placed as a figure in his own landscape paintings. At the same time, these landscapes are offered as externalized, visualized images of the artist's 'inner' landscape. These dual processes not only foreclose notions of the production of art as a signifying system but propose that the meanings of works of art are available to direct visual experience which can be represented unproblematically, simply reconstructed in a film. Through the narrative organization of a filmic biography, lavishly illustrated and illustrating, what is realised and confirmed is the construct of the artist as the effect of his works, the hero of the story, the character whose 'truth' is to be sought and visualized, reconstructed and made plain. The unity of artist and art, a unifying classless subjectivity, paralleling the psychobiographical impetus of art history as manifested in the tests on VG quoted above, is accomplished within cinematic representation in *Lust for Life*. That such a coincident representation is both possible and accepted, with only the minor qualifications from critics that I quoted above, is itself significant. The translation from art history to *la vie romancée* and to the film *Lust for Life* is founded upon not only the dispersion of art history's ideological figure of the artist as cause and effect of art, but upon the discursive structures through which such ideologies are produced, the literature of art, the narrative practices of art history.

Conclusion

The purpose of my analysis of some of the discursive practices, structures and categories of art history and their

dispersion across a range of practices of representation, exceeds, as I suggested at the beginning of this article, the internal problems of the practice of a marxist social history of art. That art history can be analysed as a practice of 'interpretative criticism', a hegemonic practice, the site of the production of bourgeois ideas about art and artist, is of course central to identifying the modes and manoeuvres by which art is evacuated from history, history from art history, precluded even. Marxist art historical work faces above all the problem of historicising a specific practice of representation but of a particular mode — visual representation. This means producing modes of analysis both appropriate to the historical specificity of that practice while simultaneously deconstructing the notion of art as a visual experience. Take for instance the reviewer of the work of feminist artists like Mary Kelly, Susan Hiller and Alexis Hunter at the Hayward Annual Exhibition in 1978, Tim Hilton, who considered their work the weakest part of the show:

Much of this is instructive, in its way, but it is not instructive to the eye. In many ways one is encouraged to read this exhibition rather than experience it visually
'Times Literary Supplement' (27 June 1978).

The effects of an informed marxist intervention will itself exceed the discrete domain of art history, however because of the effects of art historical discourses beyond art history's apparent boundaries — into art practice, art criticism, representations of art and the artist, indeed into current conditions of the production of art. It is time we began to take art history seriously as a significant site of marxist work and challenge the bourgeois ideologies of art and artist on the terrain in which their hegemony is produced and secured.

Notes

- 1 Frederick Antal, 'Remarks on the Method of Art History', reprinted in his *Classicism and Romanticism and other studies in art history*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966.
- 2 Michel Foucault, 'What is an author?' and Sue Clayton and Jonathan Curling 'On Authorship', *Screen*, vol 20 no 1, Spring 1979.
- 3 I have called the artist either VG or Van Gogh, switching between the two, rather arbitrarily I am aware, but as an attempt to distance myself from the artist, of whom it is the custom amongst VG scholars to speak in the familiar, Vincent. (He signed himself as Vincent, in part because his name is unpronounceable in any other language than Dutch, and in part in honour of the seventeenth century portraitist

- of the civic bourgeoisie with whom he intended to be compared, who also used only his forename, Rembrandt van Rijn.) In my article paintings are referred to with their *F* numbers — these are for easy reference in the Jacob Baart de la Faille *catalogue raisonné* — *The Works of Vincent van Gogh — his paintings and drawings*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970. Letters (originally written in Dutch or French) are prefixed by LT (ie letter to Theo) or W (ie letter to Wilhemina) as numbered in the *Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1958.
- 4 Fritz Novotny 'Die Popularität van Goghs', *Alte und Neue Kunst*, vol 2 no 2, 1953; translated and reprinted in B Welsh-Ovcharov (ed) *Van Gogh in Perspective*, Englewood Cliffs (New Jersey), Prentice Hall, 1974. In future references to Novotny it is this translation and edition I shall cite.
 - 5 Abraham M. Hammacher 'Van Gogh and the words' in Jacob Baart de La Faille *op. cit.*
 - 6 Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, (English translation by Geoffrey Wall), London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.
 - 7 Karl Jaspers, *Strindberg und van Gogh*, Leipzig, Ernst Birchner, 1922; translated by D. Grunow and D. Woloshin (as *Strindberg and van Gogh*), (University of Arizona Press, 1982. By 1931 the proliferation of conflicting interpretations enabled A. Hutter to publish an article 'De Vijf Diagnoses van de Ziekte van Gogh' (The five Diagnoses of the illness of van Gogh), in the *Nederlandsche Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde*, 14th February, 1931.
 - 8 Françoise Minkowska 'Van Gogh: Les Relations entre Sa Vie, Sa Maladie et Son Oeuvre', *L'Evolution Psychiatrique* no 3, 1953.
 - 9 See letter to his sister Wilhemina (W 4) 1889 'The physician here has been to Paris and went to see Theo. He told him that he did not consider me a lunatic, but that the crises that I have are of an epileptic nature.
 - 10 Margaret Ochocki, *Van Gogh a Psychological Study*, B.A. thesis (unpublished), Sunderland Polytechnic, 1979. Chapter Two, Epilepsy, pp 14-20. See also D Scott *About Epilepsy*, London, Duckworth, 1969 and B. Bihari, 'Marshall McLuhan and the Behavioural Sciences', *Art Language*, vol 1 no 3, 1970, p 15 ff.
 - 11 In W 11, Van Gogh told his sister that he had had four crisis and three fainting fits, some of which can be dated by other evidence to December 1888, February 1889, July 1889, January 1890 and February 24th 1890. It is also possible that he had either a crisis or breakdown of some sort in Paris in the late summer of 1887.
 - 12 T. Morgan, 'The Strange End of Vincent Van Gogh', *Horizon* vol 16, Autumn 1974.
 - 13 D. Outhwaite, *The Auvers Period, of Vincent Van Gogh*, M.A. thesis, London University, 1969.
 - 14 Minkowska, *op. cit.*
 - 15 Meyer Schapiro, 'On a Painting of Van Gogh', *View* series 7 no 1, 1946, reprinted in her *Selected Papers Volume 2: Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1978.
 - 16 There is a great deal of work to be done on the status of the

VG myth in America in the 1950s and on the role of VG within Minnelli's *oeuvre*, both in relation to melodrama and in terms of the artist and the figures of the neurotic.

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*Madness and art
history*

THE ARCHITECT AS ÜBERMENSCH

JULIAN PETLEY

Although a good deal has been written about architecture in the movies in terms of set design less attention has been paid to the representation of actual architectural practice. Admittedly, two recent films — *T Dan Smith* and *The Belly of an Architect* — touch on it, in very different ways, but the central concerns of each film actually lie elsewhere. There are, however, at least two films which are most definitely 'about' architects and architecture — *The Fountainhead* (1949) and *Andreas Schlüter* (1942). Both films are the product of very different cultures — the former Eisenhower's America, the latter the Third Reich — and yet, curiously, both exhibit certain remarkable similarities in the depiction of their architect heroes. That they do so is the result of their common ideological impulse — that of radical individualism.

Andreas Schlüter is but one of a whole range of German 'geniuses' celebrated in the cinema of the Third Reich (other figurés included Frederick the Great, Bismarck, Friedrich Schiller, Paracelsus, Robert Koch and Gustav Diesel). According to Dr Fritz Hippler, the Reich script adviser:

the one essential requirement for a historical film is that it should have authenticity on a grand scale. The only possible subjects for a successful historical film are personalities and events from the past which people of today know about or can identify with, be interested in or find relevant. To put it in the broadest terms, this is as it were proof of the meaning of life, the authority and historical significance, the timeless authenticity of particular historical events, situations and personalities.

For Hippler the great figures of history should be represented as 'inestimable in human terms' and as the personification of a 'life giving ideal'.¹ It goes without saying, of course, that the 'events, situations and personna-

lities' in question were German and the 'meaning' and 'historical significance' with which they were to be imbued would reflect specifically National Socialist conceptions of Germany's past — not to mention its present and future.

Of course, Third Reich films are hardly unique in their glorification of Great Individuals, nor in their ransacking of the past to suit the ideological needs of the present. As E.H. Carr has pointed out 'the cult of individualism is one of the most pervasive of modern historical myths',² and one has only to look at the wartime British and American bio-pic to realize that history (of a kind) had its uses well outside the confines of Hitler's Germany. On the other hand National Socialism did lay a *particularly* acute emphasis on individualism, raising it almost to the level of a cult or fetish. The clearest example of this, of course, is provided by the all-important *Führerprinzip* itself, whose ultimate embodiment wrote in *Mein Kampf* that:

science, too, must be regarded by the folkish state as an instrument for the advancement of national pride. Not only world history but all cultural history must be taught from this standpoint. An inventor must not only seem great as an inventor, but must also seem even greater as a national comrade. Our admiration of every great deed must be bathed in pride that its fortunate performer is a member of our own people. From all the innumerable great names of German history, the greatest must be picked out and introduced to the youth so persistently that they become pillars of an unshakeable national sentiment.'

In the case of *Andreas Schlüter* the 'great name' is the sculptor and architect once known as the 'Prussian Michelangelo' who built a new Berlin in the eighteenth century modelled on the spirit of ancient Rome. His patron was Frederick III, Elector of Brandenburg who, in 1701, became the first King of Prussia — an important stage in Prussia's rise to statehood and thus, also, in the German unification process. The rebuilding of Berlin is thus a highly visible symbolic act — the city becomes the image of the nascent, virile Prussian spirit.

Schlüter's architecture is here recreated on the grand scale by Robert Herlth, famous for his work on films such as Lang's *Der Müde Tod* and Murnau's *Faust*. It represents a specifically Prussian variant on the baroque style and its spirit has been neatly summed up by Francis Courtade and Pierre Cadars as:

monumentalism, glorification of Germanic values, violent reaction against the French influence, a ferocious desire to impress the world by a new national grandeur, all of which seem to prefigure the designs, conceptions and style of Hitler's sculptors and architects Breker, Speer and Troost.⁴

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Schlüter's Prussian baroque may not look much like Nazi neoclassicism but the spirit which animates the two are remarkably similar. For both, architecture is ideology made visible — and immortal. As one character says of Schlüter's creations, 'his work will still be here when we have all long since departed', a sentiment which is echoed by the architect's remark that 'Life is short, but art is eternal'. Again, one has only to look to Hitler, the architect manqué, to discover the contemporary resonances of these sentiments. For example, in *Mein Kampf* he bemoans the absence of 'monuments dominating the city picture which might somehow be regarded as the symbols of the whole epoch' and contrasted the modern city with the ancient, whose characteristic aspect lay not in 'private buildings, but in the community monuments which seemed made, not for the moment, but for eternity, because they were intended to reflect, not the wealth of

1. Architecture as
the glorification of
German values —
Andreas Schlüter.



the individual owner, but the greatness and wealth of the community'.⁵ Speaking in Nuremburg in 1937 Hitler spoke of National Socialist architectural creations as 'mighty witnesses to our communal existence' whose aim was to 'unify and strengthen our people more than ever', and referred to them as being the only 'truly stable element in the rash of all other phenomena ... This is why these buildings should not be conceived of for the year 1940, or for the year 2000. Like the cathedrals of our past, they will tower over the millennia of the future.'⁵

Allied to *Andreas Schlüter's* insistence on the *national* significance of architecture is its discourse of radical individualism. Like so many Third Reich film heroes Schlüter is quite explicitly represented as a Man of Destiny. Even if 'the times and people are against me' he *must* be as he is: 'even God can't change that'. Like Schiller, Koch and the rest, Schlüter is seen as a man ahead of his time, and his nationalistic aspirations make him very much a rebel figure in an age of petty, localized political concerns. There is nothing particularly surprising in the cinema of the Third Reich consistently celebrating figures such as Schlüter in overtly rebellious terms, for National Socialism always regarded and presented itself in decidedly 'radical' terms, and this 'radicalism' was intimately bound up with its nationalistic project. As Hitler himself put it: 'if, by the instrument of governmental power, a nationality is led towards its destruction, then rebellion is not only the right of every member of such a people — it is his duty'.⁷ Certainly the forces which are ranged against Schlüter and his grandiose plans are represented as being inimical to the development of Prussia as an effective state, and thus of Germany as a modern, unified nation. The film clearly sets out to demonstrate the shortcomings of a still divided Germany ('decadent' foreign influences, kitchen cabinet politics) and the problems caused by artistic patronage lying in the hands of a largely dilettante aristocracy and royal family. Frederick the Great (Frederick III's grandson, and a major figure in Third Reich cinema, witness *Der Alte und der Junge König*, *Fridericus* and above all *Der Grosse König*) regarded his grandfather as having been moved largely by vanity, a sentiment generally endorsed by nationalistic German historians and by the presentation of the king in *Andreas Schlüter* itself. Thus Schlüter himself has to endure the prejudice, reaction and narrow selfish interest of the various Prussian ministries, the scheming and jealousy of his rival, the foppish Elosander, with what Schlüter calls his 'French nonsense', numerous petty

intrigues at court, and the suspicion and mistrust of both the merchants and workers. As he himself wearily puts it after years of struggle against incomprehension, jealousy and back stairs politicking 'the times and the people are against me'.

It is this representation of the architect as an idealistic but thwarted and misunderstood *Übermensch* (Superman) that forms the closest link between *Andreas Schlüter* and *The Fountainhead*, though the latter lacks the former's intensely nationalistic dimension.

The Fountainhead (directed by King Vidor) was released in 1949. It was based on a novel of the same name by Ayn Rand, who also wrote the screenplay. Rand, who had arrived in the States at the age of 20 in 1925 as a fugitive from the Soviet Union, was the founder of a school of philosophy known as Objectivism. In an essay on the film Raymond Durnat sums up Objectivism's tenets very neatly:

progress through history is owed to egoistic Supermen who, in the process of benefitting themselves, give their less dynamic fellows the benefit of a little spin-off...Today man's healthy egoism is the victim of mass society, which

2. Schlüter as man
ahead of his time.



*spreads a psychic, plague of envy, jealousy, impotence, guilty altruism, Socialistic liberalism and Communism. In short, it is a philosophy of 'ego-über-Alles' selfishness*⁸.

Hardly surprisingly Rand's ideas found a sympathetic audience in the 'Me Decade' and, later, on the New Right. To date the book of *The Fountainhead* alone has sold over 5 million copies worldwide. Her work has been admired by both Reagan's and Ford's advisors, and in the Eighties there has been talk of a re-make of Vidor's film, and also a TV mini-series based on another of her philosophical novels, *Atlas Shrugged*, for which Stirling Silliphant wrote a screenplay. Hardly surprisingly, Rand stood on the political Right. During the Forties she joined the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee, supported Senator McCarthy and worked against Roosevelt in the 1940 presidential campaign. Later she threw her weight behind Barry Goldwater, but, interestingly, refused to support Reagan whom she regarded, according to her biographer Barbara Branden, as 'a typical conservative in his attempt to link politics and religion'.

The central character of *The Fountainhead* is Howard Roark (played by Gary Cooper, himself hardly renowned for liberal views), a visionary architect whose grandiose schemes are rejected by all and sundry. His old mentor, equally isolated, dies from drink and despair leaving him with only one friend Peter Keating. He too is an architect, but has 'sold out' by working for the popular and fashionable firm run by Guy Francon. Amongst the many critics of Roark's work are the newspapers of Gail Wynand: especially negative is Ellsworth Toohey, the architectural critic of 'The Banner'. Wynand is married to Francon's daughter Dominique, who is attracted to Roark and has a tempestuous affair with him. Keating enlists Roark's aid in the design of a low cost federal housing project, and Roark agrees to help on condition that his designs are carried out to the letter. When the project is completed Roark sees that Keating has failed to keep his promise, and persuades Dominique to dynamite it for him. However, he takes full blame for the destruction and is brought to trial. By this time Wynand has come to respect Roark and uses his paper to defend him — however, the paper suffers for this and Wynand eventually capitulates to public taste and writes an editorial attacking the architect. Roark defends himself at his trial, and the jury acquits him. Wynand commits suicide, but not before commissioning Roark to build the world's tallest skyscraper, the Wynand Building. The film ends with Dominique ascending the structures by

lift to meet Roark standing triumphantly at the top.

As Donald Albrecht aptly puts it: 'Rand's ideological cartoon of a book pits the individual, whose undaunted ego is the fountainhead of all praiseworthy human activity, against the common man, Rand's rabble, who, fearing the individual, attempts to destroy or reduce him to its own base level'. In this scheme of things Roark is seen as 'a lone champion of modernism who must struggle to have his designs built against the machinations of critics and clients, the public, and even the vast, stupid majority of his own profession'.⁹

What is so interesting about the comparison with *Andreas Schlüter* is the similarity of the forces ranged against these two architect heroes. It is not simply the fact that virtually *everyone* seems to be against them, either. Both are shown to be victims of a conservatively inclined system of patronage — Schlüter is shunned by the aristocracy, Roark by big business. Both are passed over in favour of a form of architectural classicism — Schlüter in favour of a French version of the style, Roark of an Americanised, academic neo-classicism. Both are explicitly contrasted with opportunistic 'society architects' —

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3. The skyscraper as
triumph of the will
in *The
Fountainhead*.



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Schlüter with Elosander, Roark with Keating. Each enjoys a distinctly ambiguous relationship with an ally who, ultimately, lacks the vision to support them to the hilt, Schlüter with Frederick and Roark with Wynand. Wynand, like Frederick, is an ambiguous figure, an 'inauthentic' egoist as opposed to Roark's 'authentic one', a tough minded idealist who has sold out by cynically pandering to the tastes of the masses and thus not becoming the strong leader that Americans deserve. Schlüter is opposed by shortsighted and self-seeking politicians, and one of Roark's chief adversaries is presented in explicitly political terms. This is Ellsworth Toohey, a member of the intellectual Left, and the real villain of the piece. Toohey prefers Keating's buildings because he makes concessions to popular taste and hates Roark because he fears that such an independent thinker threatens his own hold over both the masses and the monied. Just to add to his negative traits he is also trying to unionise Wynand's main newspaper! As Durnat puts it, Toohey, as represented by the film, is trying to:

sneak his way to power by simultaneously collectivising the paper and mystifying the rich — two thoroughly parasitical and mean-souled activities. For just as the critic creates nothing, merely cashing in on the artist's creativity, so the unionist creates no wealth, but merely negates and grabs, to build his paltry little 'empire' of also-rans.¹⁰

Thus the villainous Toohey isn't even allowed to believe in the socialist ideals which he professes, instead he is presented as a manipulator and power-seeker masquerading as an idealist and social reformer. In this respect it is worth pointing out that although Toohey lacks a direct parallel in *Andreas Schlüter* such negative representations of socialists (unsurprisingly) crop up time and again in other films from the Third Reich, in which, incidentally, the function of the artistic critic was held in particularly low esteem.

Not only are Schlüter and Roark opposed by a remarkably similar coalition of forces but both are themselves represented in remarkably similar terms. Andrew Saint has called *The Fountainhead* 'an unsparing celebration of the architect as hero and genius'.¹¹ Never mind that Roark's designs would have been denounced in the Third Reich as 'architectural Bolshevism', both films quite explicitly adhere to the ideology of the architect as *Übermensch*. And whilst Schlüter is represented as requiring absolute devotion and faith from his unfortunate

womenfolk, Roark's relationship with women (namely Dominique) is represented in similarly primitive, chauvinist terms and his work is celebrated in overtly phallic images. Thus not only does *The Fountainhead* imply that creativity is an exclusively masculine capability but also that architectural creation is quite explicitly linked to the virility of man. This link is at its clearest in the film's two most famous scenes; in the first Dominique visits a stone quarry where Roark is working and as she walks along the top of the quarry in the background, the foreground is filled with the image of Roark himself wielding a massive rock drill! The second is the aforementioned climax atop the Wynand Building, aptly referred to by Durgnat as a 'sociophallic apotheosis'.

To some extent Rand modelled Roark on a real-life architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. Indeed Warner Bros, the film's producers, actually approached Wright to design

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4. The
Fountainhead —
architectural
creativity linked
directly to male
virility.



The Fountainhead, but found his fee of \$250,000 too pricey. They then hired Edward Carrere to do the job. As Donald Albrecht points out in the final chapter of his *Designing Dreams*, there are significant differences between Carrere's and Wright's work, and one might add that there would have been points on which Rand and Wright would have come to blows. On the other hand both admired the same authors (Hugo, Herbert Spencer) and, as Saint points out:

on the substantive questions of personal belief, in their admiration for individualism and enterprise as the pristine American virtues, in their contempt for the state, for mass culture and for compromise and in their propensity for hero worship, architect and author are in uncanny agreement ... The intellectual foundations of Roark and Wright are at all essential points, one and the same. Together they point to the primacy of a single, much admired stereotype: the creative individual manifesting his will in action.¹²

On the other hand it has to be admitted that although Rand clearly did her homework on the American architectural scene of the Twenties and Thirties, *The Fountainhead* is not primarily about architecture at all. Rather it uses the discourse of architecture as a means of projecting a personal philosophy, a heady mixture of Nietzsche and Herbert Spencer. Architecture here becomes a symbolic battleground where the individual struggles with the mass, capitalism takes on the Judaeo-Christian ethic, and a radical individualism asserts its supremacy over all forms of altruism. However, the ground chosen is an interesting one. Architecture is a subject about which most people have an opinion, not least because it is an art form which they encounter every day — unlike, for example painting or sculpture. This partly explains why the Prince of Wales' views on the subject receive such wide coverage and, apparently, assent. It also explains why a Hollywood film of the late Forties is able to have a convinced modernist as its subject, whilst a similar film on, say, Schoenberg or Pollock would be unthinkable. Indeed, if contemporary audiences did have a certain taste for architectural modernism it is at least partly because cinema set design in the Twenties and Thirties had accustomed them to its look. However, this does not explain why two films about architects from two very different cultures should share such a remarkably similar ideology of profound, radical individualism.

We began by noting, via E.H. Carr, the pervasiveness of the cult of individualism, and it could be argued that this cult is especially strong in the field of architecture. In this

the strain of artistic individualism which ascribes both merit in particular buildings and general progress in architecture according to a personal conception, usually of style, embodied in buildings and developed from architect to architect over the course of history. According to this ancient theory (first applied to art by the disciples of Plato), a building is significant or insignificant in so far as it incorporates an idea or ideas conceived by its individual designer and the history of architecture becomes the web of such significant ideas, worked out in special buildings. This understanding of architecture, long prevalent, shows only limited signs of receding today.¹³

This 'auteur' theory of buildings is propagated both by architectural critics, most of whom have been trained in a tradition of the humanities which regards art first and foremost as an instance of *individual* expression, and by architects themselves, who want to see themselves primarily as artists and creators rather than mere draughtsmen or builders. It is a mark of the widespread prevalence of this particular manifestation of artistic mythology that both *Andreas Schlüter* and *The Fountainhead* should feature such peculiarly similar heroes, and that something of their single-minded obsessiveness can also be glimpsed in the characters which give *The Draughtsman's Contract* and *The Belly of an Architect* their names.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Leisner and Erwin. *Nazi Cinema*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1974. p 106.
- 2 E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1964, p 33.
- 3 Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, London, Hutchinson, 1969, p 387.
- 4 Francis Courtade and Pierre Cadars, *Histoire du Cinéma Nazi*, Paris, Eric Losfeld, 1972, p 94.
- 5 Hitler, *op. cit.* p 240.
- 6 Quoted in Berthold Hinz, *Art in the Third Reich*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1979, pp 197-199.
- 7 Hitler, *op. cit.* pp 87-88.
- 8 Raymond Durnat, 'The Fountainhead' in *Film Comment* September/October 1973, vol 9 no 5, p 31.
- 9 Donald Albrecht, *Designing Dreams: Modern architecture in the movies*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1986, p 168.
- 10 Durnat, *op. cit.* p 31.
- 11 Andrew Saint, *The Image of the Architect*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1983, p 1.
- 12 *ibid.* p 14.
- 13 *ibid.* p 6.

THE CHILDISH, THE INSANE AND THE UGLY

Modern Art in popular films and fiction of the Forties

DIANE WALDMAN

Many art and film historians view the artistic modernism and mass cultural forms of the twentieth century as separate and distinct developments, and prefer to study one or the other. Others, I think rightly, assert that the concern with pure form, the language of art, and the valorization of the new in the artistic movements of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a direct response to the 'massification' and commodification of art in that same period. As Linda Nochlin puts it:

While this purifying, limiting operation can in one sense be interpreted as a continuation of Realist 'honesty' and 'truthfulness', it is also a successful way of limiting the audience of art to those whose taste is guaranteed by its purity of motivation at the very moment when mass communication, kitsch, and academicism were beginning to make art attainable to, and the business of, an ever increasing, ever less-educated public.... Until the latter part of the 19th century, pictorial iconography might be difficult, but it could be made available to reason and reasoned explication. The idea that only an elect — an anti-Philistine elect known as the avant-garde — self-chosen and self-perpetuating — could respond to the work of art on the basis of its art qualities alone, is a social response, not merely an aesthetic one, to the tremendous social and institutional pressures on the production and consumption of art that went along with the more general upheavals of the 19th and 20th centuries.¹

Proceeding from this assumption, this paper takes a look at what happens when mass cultural forms represent modern art. More specifically, I will discuss the representation of modern art in some popular American films,

fiction and essays from the period 1939-1949. Many of these films include a portrait and a sequence around a portrait as the occasion for championing an illusionist against a modernist aesthetic. Although it might be argued that they do this in order to affirm their *own* illusionism, I wish to go beyond this purely formal explanation. I will investigate the charges against modernism which surface in these texts — its 'incomprehensibility,' its appeal to a narrow elite, its 'ugliness,' its similarity to the work of 'children' and the 'mentally deranged,' its political subversiveness. Although many of these attacks on modern art pander to the lowest common denominator, to anti-intellectualism, xenophobia and redbaiting of the worst sort, their pervasiveness points to the very real class nature of artistic taste, and the gap between 'high' and mass culture, often exploited for ideological purposes. It is especially ironic when nostalgia for the past and its representational forms surfaces in film — a medium created in and by the economic, social and technological change against which this nostalgia reacts.²

In 1959, the Museum of Modern Art celebrated its tenth anniversary with an exhibition entitled 'Art in Our Time.' On this occasion, a writer in the *Saturday Review* claimed that the exhibit 'reveals the progress of a quarter century, not only among the practitioners of modernism, but in the attitude of the public toward experimentalism in art.'³ Referring to the violent reaction to the Armory Show of 1913, which introduced Cezanne, Gauguin, Seurat, Rousseau, Redon and the Cubists to the American public (and which, in the words of another, slightly later writer 'burst upon us like an aesthetic atomic bomb'⁴), he reminded readers that 'vice crusaders discussed the morality of the "Nude Descending a Staircase," Daniel Chester French denied that Maillol was a sculptor of talent, and art students burned Matisse in effigy.' The author was pleased that:

Now, the financial stringencies of European countries geared to a war economy, and that ostracism of modern art by authoritarian regimes which drives artists-in-exile to America, have combined to make our country in a real sense the home of modernism.

He also commended the Museum for:

the distinguished and influential part which the laboratory in West Fifty-Third Street has played in creating a more tolerant, a more genuinely critical attitude toward the eccentricities and the iconoclasm of our time

.... Controversy with regard to the claims and accomplishments of those who distort and those who abstract now proceeds on a higher level of intelligence than in those days when wild men were accused of drawing 'crudely' because they could not draw 'correctly.'

He concludes:

If modern art has ceased to be considered a conspiracy by a subversive minority, and is studied and judged as a new approach not only to nature, but to man's task of turning to esthetic and practical advantage the new forms, the new materials a new age has provided, a large share of credit can be claimed by the institution whose tenth birthday coincides with The World of Tomorrow.

In retrospect this piece seems both premature and overly optimistic. Attacks on modern art were to appear in popular films, fiction, and periodicals of the decade, in everything from *Harper's* and the *Atlantic Monthly* to *Senior Scholastic*. The latter published an essay by a high school student which won fourth prize in the 1948 Scholastic Writing Awards: 'Peoples Iss Nuts Youst Lak Monkeys Iss.' It begins:

It certainly is a shame. It costs 35 cents to get in to see what nuts can produce after they crack up. They let these queers go around loose, unmolested and unleashed, while they lock up substantial and reliable people like murderers and maniacs.

The essay continues in this vein, describing four boys' visit to the Museum of Modern Art:

We entered the Museum of Modern Art warmly, taking careful note of all the exits, in case a hasty retreat was necessary. We quickly lost ourselves in the maze of rooms and hallways, stairs and alcoves. All of a sudden, Jimmy let out a scream of terror and Henry fell to his knees, babbling like an idiot. There before us, looming up out of nowhere, stood this awful thing. It covered the whole wall in front of us and mainly consisted of writhing devils' heads, broken arms, and feet; inanimate objects were being strangled and stabbed; cows had ears like dogs and noses like electric light bulbs. When my initial shock wore off, I crept closer to see who or what this thing was. The panel read 'Guernica Mural — Picasso' and told how everybody thought it was a masterpiece.⁵

Modern art fared no better in some of the adult magazines. In 'The Victory and Defeat of Modernism,' George Biddle in *Harper's* similarly denounced the Guernica mural for its alleged 'escapism':

And the crisis through which the world is now passing illustrates the frustration of abstract art when it attempts to face realities. Picasso did just that in his Guernica mural. In semi-abstract symbols he attempted to describe his horror of the Nazi brutality in Spain. I venture to say that these symbols would have a hundred different meanings to a hundred different people. If one speaks to be understood one must speak in a common language.⁶

He praised, on the other hand, Walt Disney and the trend by which art was being integrated with business ('International Business Machines, N.W. Ayer and Son and Abbott Laboratories have spent well over 150,000 dollars in the past few years on commissioning or buying paintings from our leading American artists to advertise their commodities'⁷) and with Federal or State government.

But what of film, the art form of the twentieth century? Recall that Walter Benjamin, in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' argued that 'mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie.'⁸ Although he was talking about film's potential, and not the case where 'movie-makers' capital sets the fashion,⁹ Benjamin was still quite optimistic in 1936. Arnold Hauser, writing almost 20 years later, concurs with Benjamin ('apart from film, progressive art is almost a closed book for the uninitiated') but predicts that 'the cleft will sooner or later arise that even in this field separates the layman from the connoisseur.'¹⁰ Given such categories as 'avant-garde' films, 'art' films, and the number of film journals, conferences, etc, the accuracy of this prediction seems self-evident.

So how does popular film view modern art? Like the other mass cultural forms: with hostility and suspicion. At the outset, let me emphasize that with the possible exception of one, the films I will be discussing are not 'about' art and artists. They are modern Gothic romances which center around a female protagonist and her ambivalent relationship with her husband, whom she suspects of being a murderer — Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (UA, 1940) and *Suspicion* (RKO, 1941), Tourneur's *Experiment Perilous* (RKO, 1944), Godfrey's *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* (WB, 1947) and Korda's *A Woman's Vengeance* (Universal-International, 1948).

Initially I was attracted to and interested in these films for reasons and purposes different from the concerns addressed here. Yet I was struck by both the frequent hostile allusions to modern art and occasionally to high art

in general, and the use of the presence of a realistic portrait as an occasion to valorize an illusionist over a modernist aesthetic.

Let me give a few examples. In most of these films, either the heroine or the hero-villain are wealthy and/or aristocratic, which explains the presence of portraits, first, as additional signifiers of wealth and class status. What is more interesting, however, is the way in which these portraits became a focus or occasion for championing an illusionist aesthetic.

The best-known example occurs in *Suspicion*, where the traditional portrait of Lina's father, General McLaidlaw, which hangs originally in Lina's father's house, is opposed to the abstract painting which appears in Lina's second home, decorated by her husband Johnny. Stephen Heath uses this example to begin his article, 'Narrative Space.' Of the sequence in *Suspicion* in which Lina is visited by the two police inspectors, Heath writes:

The scene finds its centre in a painting: the massive portrait of Lina's father which bears with all its Oedipal weight on the whole action of the film . . . and before which she now positions herself to read the newspaper report of the friend's death and to gather strength enough to face the scrutiny of the law, the look relayed from portrait to police and to portrait again.¹¹

The one exception to the purposeful symmetry and economy of the sequence is Benson's gaze left to the other painting — the 'post-cubist Picasso-like painting' which Heath describes as "useless" (isolated, without resonance over the film . . .), serving to demonstrate the rectitude of the portrait, the true painting at the centre of the scene, utterly in frame in the film's action.¹² The significance of Benson's fascination with the painting for Heath, then, is its 'interruption of the homogeneity of the narrative economy . . .'¹³

While I am basically in agreement with that analysis, several other things could be said about the sequence. First, although the 'post-cubist' painting is 'useless' from the point of view of narrative motivation, the fact that it does serve 'to demonstrate the rectitude of the portrait, the true painting,' demonstrates its 'usefulness' from another point of view, and the fact that it does have 'resonance over the film' when it takes its place among a complex of thematic associations and oppositions: McLaidlaws/Aysgarths, old money/new money, realistic portraiture/post-cubism. Johnny, Lina's husband, is déclassé — the scion of a wealthy family, now totally without money —

and the opening sequence of the film economically conveys Johnny's class position: Lina encounters him on a train attempting to ride in a first-class compartment with a third-class ticket. The film establishes an opposition between the old wealth and stability of Lina's family on the one hand, and the new wealth and recklessness of Johnny's on the other. *Before the Fact*, the Francis Iles novel upon which *Suspicion* is based, is more explicit:

The Aysgarths in fact, at Elefield, were neither quite of the old order, nor of the new. The more the land of England is changing hands, the more do the former holders by right of birth look down on the new owners by right of purchase; and the more do the latter scoff at the former. For one who takes pleasure in despising his neighbor more than himself, the English countryside of this decade offers exceptional opportunities.¹⁴

This opposition, then, is also signified by the portrait of the General versus the 'post-cubist' art that Johnny prefers, suggesting that the latter is slightly suspicious, along with Johnny's character.

Second, Benson's fascination with the painting and the supposed humour of the sequence is based upon a contemporary 'truism': the incomprehensibility of modern or nonfigurative art to the layperson (in this case, a detective), and the widening gap between high art and mass culture.

A similar sequence occurs in *A Woman's Vengeance*. Based on the same mode of humour as the sequence above, workmen in the central character's house gawk at a Modigliani and tease the maid about the 'speaking likeness.' In this film, attitudes toward art are used for purposes of characterization. A distinction is drawn between Henry's wife Emily, who, besides being a whining invalid, says that modern painting 'makes her sick,' and Janet, Henry's friend, who gets a volume of Proust for her birthday and admires Modigliani. However, since it is eventually revealed that Janet is a murderer, and Henry a philanderer, the association of modernism with these characters is hostile rather than sympathetic.

The short story upon which the film is based is Aldous Huxley's *The Gioconda Smile*, a title deemed 'too obtuse' by the studio when Huxley adapted the work for the screen.¹⁵ In the story, not only are their attitudes toward art used to characterize the women, but they are seen by Henry in terms of art works as well, as the title indicates. Thus Janet, the intellectual snob, is described as a Roman matron with a mysterious 'Gioconda smile.' Doris, his second wife, with her round babyish face, resembles the

pictures of Louise de Kerouaille ('Who's Louise de Kera — whatever it is?' she asks). The visage of the once beautiful Emily was now 'the face of a dead Christ by Morales.'

Huxley's objectification of women in art works apparently extended to his artistic criticism as well as his artistic creation. Huxley participated (along with Clement Greenberg and Francis Henry Taylor, director of the Metropolitan Museum, and others) in a 'Round Table' discussion of modern art sponsored by *Life* magazine in 1948. The painting 'Parnassus' by Nicholas Poussin was cited by Huxley:

to illustrate an important esthetic criterion: that one of the characteristics of a great, as opposed to a lesser, work of art is that it imposes a unity on a greater diversity of elements. The Poussin picture, according to Huxley, contains a 'very subtle and elaborate system of formal relationships,' which the artist has welded into a perfect whole. Mr. Huxley also pointed out that Poussin used the same face for all his female figures, showing that he was much more interested in the picture's formal than in its psychological content.¹⁶

Rebecca and *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* actually involve characters who are artists. In *Rebecca*, we learn that the heroine's father was a traditional artist, and the heroine herself complains of her own work that she can never get the perspective right. One of the minor characters, upon discovering that the heroine sketches, remarks, 'Not this modern stuff I hope. You know, turn a lampshade upside down to represent the soul in torment. Ha!' (This speech was not in Du Maurier's novel.)

In *The Two Mrs. Carrolls*, the artist-husband's nonrepresentational style is actually presented as a sign of his mental derangement. With some confusion of terms, the daughter in the film says of his portrait of her mother, 'It isn't a portrait. Father says it's representational.' (Actually, this man paints his various wives as 'The Angel of Death' before he kills them.) The temporary script and master synopsis for the film were even more explicit. The former details Geoffrey's method of painting and theory of art as 'not strictly figurative' and 'interested in ideas'; 'but Geoffrey's art is limited by a certain morbidity, the result, if one looks for a Freudian interpretation, of seeing his parents killed in his childhood.' Geoffrey's paintings are described here as 'depicting human figures in dramatic and bizarre poses,' and in the master synopsis as 'the product of a mind that must be verging on insanity.'¹⁷ Although a rebellion against naturalism was a common response of portraitists to the rivalry of photography,

'mentally ill' was, as we shall see, one of the epithets most commonly applied to modern portraitists and artists in the 1940s.

The Two Mrs. Carrolls evidences a suspicion not only of modern art but of art in general. As in *Experiment Perilous*, where the hero is a self-proclaimed 'artistic illiterate,' the housekeeper in *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* snaps, 'When you work for an artist, you can expect just about anything.' In fact, publicity for the film played off the stereotype of the effeminate artist and contrasted it with Humphrey Bogart's usual screen persona of the 'tough guy.' The Warner Brothers pressbook includes an article with the headline 'Smock and Beret Make Tough Guy Hit Ceiling,' which describes producer Mark Hellinger's 'gag' — allowing Bogart to think he was to wear a smock and beret — and Bogart's subsequent refusal. In addition, the temporary script includes a brief sequence in which a group of people discuss Geoffrey's paintings with this description: 'The man is an art critic — the women are normal people.' Once again, this points to the widening gulf between high culture and its practitioners and critics on the one hand, and mass culture on the other. Benjamin's essay becomes relevant here as well, for in a continuation of the argument cited earlier he states:

The progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert. Such fusion is of great social significance. The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion.¹⁸

The question now arises: why the portrait as an occasion for such a hostile view of modern art? In part, because the portrait represents one of the dominant genres in the history of Western painting, with a marked increase in illusionist techniques which culminate in the illusionist aesthetic of Hollywood film-making. But the history of portraiture develops and declines with a society which stresses the importance of the *individual*, usually the individual wealthy white man and the women and children associated with him. The portrait originates in Greece in 700 B.C. With the development of commerce, urban society and the idea of a competitive economy, the notion of individualism becomes prominent in all fields of cultural life: thus we get the beginning of a subjective trend in poetry, the predominance of the lyric, the new

claim of the poet to be recognized (as opposed to the collective work of the rhapsodes), the first signed works of visual art, and the public portrait, coins and miniatures.¹⁹ In the Roman tradition, portrait sculpture was revived in the masks of ancestors. In the last years of the Republic, the patrician privilege of displaying portraits of ancestors in funeral processions had been extended to plebian families, but the cult of ancestral portraits remained essentially a feature of aristocratic funerals.²⁰

Portraiture declines in the Middle Ages. 'The crucial thing is that in the range of commissions set to medieval art no need, no requirement of any kind, aroused or stimulated the capacity to interpret individual characteristics.'²¹ In the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, portraiture is revived in the form of the portraits of donors of religious paintings, but they are relegated to the corners of the panel, the portrait still subordinate to religious considerations.²²

Even in religious paintings, we begin to see the shift towards interest in individuality. For example, 'the portraits of donors in the Ghent Altar as well as in Jan van Eyck's other religious pictures are dimensionally speaking, equivalent to the holy figures and are not inferior to them in significance, taking the picture as a whole. Man confronts his God with a newly awakened feeling of self-hood.'²³ Or, 'Ghirlandaio's fresco cycles are so replete with portraits that they almost serve as family chronicles of the wealthy patricians who sponsored them.'²⁴

Finally, with the re-emergence of commerce and urban life in the Renaissance, we see the reawakening of interest in the individual and the secularization of the portrait:

The portrait as we understand it comes into its own as a genre when the person portrayed occupies the center of the panel as the nobility and the gentleman come to occupy the center of public life. The portrait, removed from the religious painting and the fresco, seen to be more than a painted medal or a derivative of sculpture, appears with the growing secularization of life and the development of late Renaissance courtoisie, and thereby comes to serve several functions.²⁵

This secularization, in addition to the movement of the person to the center of the panel, and the interest in the individual revealed in such things as the development of the convention of the three-quarter angle,²⁶ includes the naturalization of the symbolic or religious. For example, in Janson's interpretation of the famous *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride*, 'the symbolic is included as naturalistic detail':

the shoes which the couple has taken off remind us that they are standing on 'holy ground'; even the little dog is an emblem of marital faith. . . . The natural world as in the Merode Altarpiece, is made to contain the world of the spirit in such a way that the two actually become one.²⁷

Gombrich includes a humorous anecdote from Leonardo's notebooks which basically illustrates the same point:

It happened to me. . . . that I made a religious painting which was bought by one who so loved it that he wanted to remove the sacred representation so as to be able to kiss it without suspicion. Finally his conscience prevailed over his sighs and lust, but he had to remove the picture from his house.²⁸

Not only does this illustrate the increased secularization and naturalization of painting, but cites a precedent for the strength of the illusionism which causes a man to fall in love with a painting, as in *Experiment Perilous* or Preminger's *Laura*.

The revival of interest in realistic portraiture and the mastery of physiognomic expression takes its place along with the more frequently mentioned techniques of illusionist art: the rendering of space through perspective, and the suggestion of light and texture. The association of the portrait with illusionist art continues in the question of resemblance, and the debate between the champions of the 'fine' versus the 'like' portrait. This debate illustrates the tension between decorum, convention and flattery of the patron, on the one hand, and realism and the vision of the artist on the other. Along with the landscape and the still life, portraiture as a genre dominates the Western tradition of painting until the middle of the nineteenth century. All this changes with the invention of photography, or rather, with the acceleration of industrialization and the concomitant philosophies of positivism, empiricism, and the emphasis on scientific observation into which photography is born.

As with other realistic genres, the invention of photography made realistic portraiture somewhat superfluous. Ingres, for example, was described as 'the last great professional in a field soon to be monopolized by the camera.'²⁹ Remy Saisselin, the author of a book entitled *Style, Truth and the Portrait*, points out that 'the whole man of portraiture had to give way to passing glimpses of individuals,'³⁰ and 'the art of portraiture was to die as a significant genre with the society that had of it a model for man. Everything would change after 1848.'³¹ Portraiture, as mentioned previously, turns to exaggeration, carica-

ture, satire, abstraction. Implicit in Saisselin's last remark is a nostalgia for the type of art which is possible in a society which valorizes the individual. This is more explicit at the end of his essay, in which he laments that the 'portrait today is hardly a believable genre,' quotes from the *Notebooks* of Henri de Montherlant: 'I love those Renaissance portraits in which the principal person points with one hand to his breast as if to indicate that he, and none other, is important,' and concludes that we no longer live in the type of society that makes the art of the portrait possible: 'Our society is neither aristocratic nor monarchical, and power and privileges have taken to forms which are not susceptible to artistic glorification. Rather, since Daumier, we know them to be necessarily an object of satire.'¹² In its preface, this book, based upon an exhibition at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1963, is even more explicit about the relationship between the 'lost art' of portraiture and mass culture, and the role of the preservers of high culture within a 'mass society.' The author, Sherman E. Lee, bemoans:

the waning interest in individual human beings and their external appearance as an indication of character. These considered en masse, have become above all units in large series or groups designated variously as majorities, pluralities, minorities, trends, consumers, etc — we know their designations all too well. Still, we fight for the preservation of the individual for his worth, his idiosyncracies, his peculiar place within his particular circle. The emergence of the individual, as distinguished from the hero, as a worthy subject for art was the original contribution of European art after the 14th century, the 'waning of the Middle Ages.' It followed the rise of a cultural tone that recognized and was interested in man as an individual and as a representative of a creative class.¹³

The individual referred to was most likely an aristocrat or a member of the newly emerging merchant class, although Lee does not see *him* as such; his generic 'man' and unspecified 'we fight' posits a universal human condition. I cite this example because it seems to me the same sentiment represented in the valorization of the portrait against modern art in the films.

The novel upon which this film is based is much more explicit about the juxtaposition of the portrait with both modern art and modern life. Since the novel has a contemporary setting, it is the Museum of Modern Art which contains the portrait: "Purely representational," said an affected voice at his shoulder. He was alone with

Allida.' Afterwards, the doctor goes home: 'He took in at a glance the sticky pink of the walls, the impersonalized banality of the 'reproduced' furniture, the geometric neatness of the ranged medical magazines on the table, and the stiff folds of the coarse net curtains motionless in the air-conditioned steel-framed windows.'³⁴ Thus the 'purely representational' portrait is favorably contrasted with not only the modern works which we assume the owner of the 'affected voice' prefers, but with the 'impersonalized banality' of mass-produced furniture and decor. This passage succeeds, then, in linking modern art and mass culture, and expressing nostalgia for a pre-industrial, pre-mass cultural era and one of its representational forms, a realistic portrait. The film takes this one step further by placing *its story in 1903*.

The 'affected voice' which dismisses the portrait as 'purely representational' leads us to the main charges against modern art: its incomprehensibility, its appeal to a narrow elite, its ugliness, the claim that it looks like the work of children and/or the mentally deranged, the claim that its practitioners were insincere fakes attempting to deceive the public, and the claim that it was politically subversive. For example, S. J. Woolf, in an article entitled '*Is It Art or Is It Double Talk?*' juxtaposes a painting by Dali with one 'by a patient in an insane asylum,' portraits by Picasso and Modigliani with works of children age seven and twelve (and of course, these comparisons, meant to be derisive, impugn the imaginations and creativity of children and those considered mentally ill), and, in the ultimate defense of illusionistic art and vulgar biographical criticism, attributes Matisse's style to his 'defective vision.'³⁵ As one critical response to this article pointed out, Woolf's authority as an art critic was based upon the fact that he was an artist who 'painted a series of portraits of the leading American generals.'³⁶

The chief proponent of the 'modern art as fakery' school was T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbing, whose *Mona Lisa's Mustache, A Dissection of Modern Art* was published in 1947. Robsjohn-Gibbing's main argument was that modern art is 'a revival of one of the oldest systems for getting power,' ie, magic and deliberate mystification.³⁷ Robsjohn-Gibbing was not above presenting his theories in fictionalized form as well. In 'Dilemma: the perils of making a cult of the modern,' a short story printed in *House Beautiful*, Harriet, the Midwestern heroine, is taken by her friend Elise (who 'looked even more bizarre than usual') to an opening at the Museum of New Reality. The logo for the exhibit, 'Ectoplastic Design,' is an enormous white foot cut out of

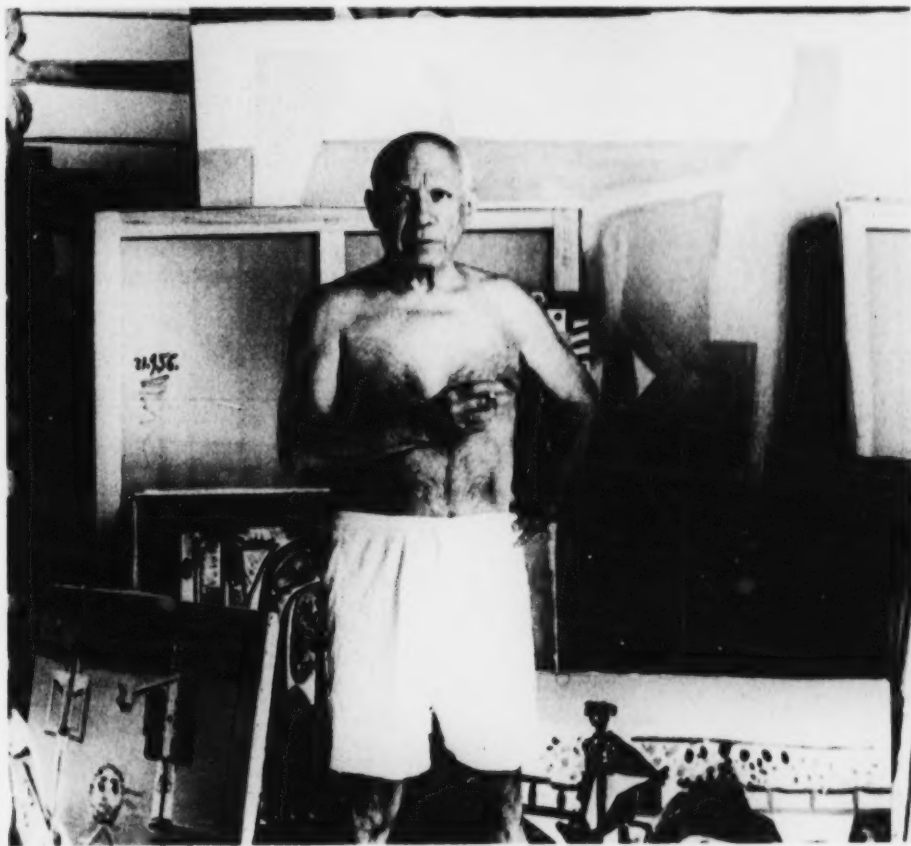
plywood, with two circles of silver wire crossing it. Among the artists (all 'foreigners'), number one de Xifos, active in the 'Greek Adad Movement'; Mirsky, whose ceiling fan is presented as something from his 'neoplastic period'; the cynical and practical Kissitzsky, who exploits his trouble with US customs to increase the price of his work; and last, but not least, Karl Junger, who 'squeezes wet plaster between his hands while he's in a trance.' The people viewing the exhibit, with the exception of Harriet, of course, are pretentious, insufferable snobs, calling all those who disagree with them 'bourgeois Philistines.' And, as for Harriet, 'she had resisted the temptation to tell Elise that she thought modern art looked better in Bonwit Teller's window than it did in the Museum,' and the narrative ends with Harriet triumphantly throwing her program from the exhibit into the wastepaper basket.⁵⁸

The charge of 'ugliness' was another which echoed throughout the decade. For example, Margaret Cresson

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1. Picasso, seen as a prime exponent of Modern Art as fakery.



argued that modernism is ugly and 'John Doe' is unimpressed:

He goes to a fine, big art show. What does he find? Back yards and railroad sidings, dark and murky landscapes, prostitutes fixing their garters, bulbous-limbed nudes. He can see enough of those where he came from. He guesses that art isn't for him. He decides to go to the movies instead.³⁹

Again the class nature of art appreciation is condescendingly proposed, with mass culture available to fill the gap. Often this critique of 'ugliness' on aesthetic grounds was a thinly disguised political attack. The 'Purpose of Art' in *Catholic World* begins:

Medieval art was warm and pure, gay with color and with youth, deep of soul and popular. Today, art is often so frigid, unclean, stale, insipid, that in Goethe's words, it sickens the soul. Everybody has heard about the ejaculation made by some visitor to a modern exhibition of paintings: 'Oh, that my eyes could vomit!'

The article attacks not only 'modern art' in the name of the amorphous 'people' ('The people will not be satisfied with mere artistic form, nor interested in painters' experiments and delicate questions of light-effects. Their eyes are too normal, their palate is too natural, their taste is too unspoiled, for that,') but a certain kind of 'realism' as well: 'But realism becomes unhealthy and perverse, if it regards as most real the things which are vile and common and ugly — the scum of life — and lives and works for them alone. . . .'

Much is made of the democratic tendency of art and many believe that by means of it, art and true appreciation of art will again find a way to the heart of the people. To be sure, art is not to be reproached for devoting itself to the fourth estate, to the machinist, to the plowman, the proletarian, any more than fiction is to be reproached when it leaves the salon for the workshop and the peasant's hut. . . . Yet everything depends upon the purpose of art in attempting to get down to the common people. If it aims to exploit misery, hunger and filth, as a novel means for the stimulation of dulled nerves, it scarcely deserves praise. If it aims to raise the prevalent discontent to a higher pitch, to stir up hate and jealousy [sic], it acts criminally; it becomes a socialistic agitator, a dangerous anarchist.⁴⁰

The attack on modern art as subversive at times was not even so thinly disguised as this. Against the optimistic claim of the *Saturday Review* writer that 'modern Art has

ceased to be considered a conspiracy by a subversive minority,' and that America had become a 'home of modernism' because of the ostracism of modern art by authoritarian regimes, there were attacks such as that by Hearst columnist Paul Mallon, who, in an open letter to his boss, requested that:

You, as a primary advocate of Americanism, should use all your resources in the press and magazine field to let the public get the facts. Today the public mind thinks of art in terms of medieval foreign masters. Our art is as good or better but it has not been similarly publicized. . . .

Much modern art is psychologically Communist. Picasso, who led this school, is a Communist. He gave eminence to the imaginative school of art in which the observer or buyer must imagine how well the artist conceived the painting no matter how poorly he executed it or presented it. This is precisely the same process of the Communist political doctrine which requires the observer to imagine the nonexistent beauties of a way of life which reality would disclose as far from sublime. It has blood on its hands.⁴¹

Note the negative connotation placed on the utopian strivings of the imagination, both in art and politics.

This attitude is, unfortunately, alive and well today. In Denver, Colorado, a group called the Denver Businessmen's Briefing on February 3, 1981, published a two-page ad in the *Rocky Mountain News* telling readers how they could 'evaluate the ACLU and others . . . using the Communist/Socialist Conspiracy Checklist.' This forty-seven point checklist of 'declared goals of the Communist Party' included such statements as plans to 'control art critics and directors of art museums' and plans to 'promote ugliness, repulsive and meaningless art.'⁴²

In the Forties, these kinds of overt political attacks were not limited to the rantings of the Hearst press. Francis Henry Taylor, director of the Metropolitan Museum, damns Picasso and his successors as he praises them:

That this message is more often than not a message of propaganda for some popular and current ideology is of course one of the fundamental dangers inherent in the modern movement. But Picasso, even when he is most socially destructive, is free from the charge of producing something meaningless or utterly private in its concept.⁴³

Taylor lays the blame not at the feet of modern artists, but with the decline of traditional and spiritual values, and he supports his position with a reactionary and racist quote from Toynbee:

The prevailing tendency to abandon our artistic traditions is not the result of technical incompetence; it is the deliberate abandonment of a style which is losing its appeal to a rising generation because this generation is ceasing to cultivate its aesthetic sensibilities on traditional Western lines. We have willfully cast out of our souls the great masters who have been the familiar spirits of our forefathers; and while we have been wrapped in self-complacent admiration of the spiritual vacuum that we have created, a Tropical African spirit in music and dancing and statuary has made an unholy alliance with a pseudo-Byzantine spirit in painting and bas-reliefs, and has entered in to dwell in a house which it found swept and garnished. . . . Our abandonment of our traditional artistic technique is manifestly the consequence of some kind of spiritual breakdown in our Western Civilization; and the cause of this breakdown evidently cannot be found in a phenomenon which is one of its results.⁴⁴

Similarly, Peyton Boswell, Jr. argued in *American Art Today*, 'Because of our Anglo-Saxon heritage American art is a literal three-dimensional art. There is little room in its pattern for such aesthetic detours as cubism or non-objective painting.'⁴⁵

Writers such as this had to do some fancy footwork in order to explain the ostracism of modernism in the Stalinist USSR and in Nazi Germany, and to distinguish their positions from those of the official positions of regimes they decried. George Biddle, in 'The Victory and Defeat of Modernism,' then concludes by asking 'Is the distinction I made between the social role of art in a democratic state and in the totalitarian states of Europe-Russia, Germany, Italy — a somewhat legalistic one?' A good question, but Biddle worms out of it by concluding that the difference lies simply in the question of censorship. Similarly, Taylor asserts that 'no intelligent person would seek to deny the innate and inalienable right of the artist to do and think as he pleases,' yet at the same time states, 'But as a citizen the time has come for him to choose whether he is for civilization or whether he is against it, whether he believes in the freedom of individual conscience or whether he is ready to accept whatever propaganda is fed to him with a spoon.' He then returns to his original assertion: 'Only by complete freedom of creation can the integrity of art be kept alive.'⁴⁶ Thus Taylor could conclude:

But that, on the other hand, is no reason why the public should be dragooned to admire and to applaud what they cannot understand. If the public must respect the artist's freedom of creation, then in the same way the latter must

*acknowledge the public's freedom of acceptance or rejection. Any other concept is academic and totalitarian.*⁴⁷

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That the modern art establishment itself was on the defensive can be revealed in the nature of some of the exhibits at the Museum of Modern Art which sought to legitimize modern art by the appeal to tradition. For example, in 1940, a new exhibit contrasted twenty-eight pieces by masters of the Italian Renaissance with twenty-nine modern pieces on similar subjects. Against accusations that this was a sensational stunt, 'The museum says that both groups belong to the same stream of European art. Looking from one to the other, it believes, the spectator will see by contrast what the differences are and why, and what fundamental qualities the artists have in common.'⁴⁸

Later in the decade, to celebrate its twentieth anniversary, the Museum opened a show, entitled 'Timeless Aspects of Modern Art,' which juxtaposed historical examples with modern, not on the basis of any lineal descent or influence, but simply on the basis of resemblance. For example, a Panamanian deer's head mask used in Indian ceremonials, was placed next to Picasso's sketch of a horse in the bombing of Guernica 'to show how similar devices were used to create frightening effects,' while 'the way line can create an effect of mystery' is illustrated in an Argentinian Indian disk and a ghost's face on an envelope by Paul Klee in 1937. 'To show how an impression of spiritual solemnity is often achieved by simplification and by enlargement of head and eyes,' the museum hangs an ivory Madonna by ninth century Christian Copts in Syria or Egypt with a 1932 painting of Christ by Rouault. The 'continuing use of elongation and attenuation for emotional effect' is shown in an Etruscan warrior of about 600 B.C. and Lehmbruch's youth of 1913, while a Micronesian mask and a 1915 head by Modigliani illustrate that elongation and simplification in modern art have age-old precedent.' The explanation of the museum clearly indicates the legitimizing intention of the exhibit:

*There is no intention of proving that these affinities enlarge or detract from the quality of modern art. We want only to show that some things which look weird and unprecedented have been done by artists since the very beginning of civilization. We do not pretend that the motives for their production are the same. But because the objects resemble each other in some aspects we hope to prove that modern artists are not just tricksters trying to invent bewildering new means of expression in order to be different or perverse.*⁴⁹

René d'Harnoncourt, who arranged the exhibit, skirts the issue of the ahistorical nature of it:

Modern art is that art which is an expression of our time and is firmly anchored in our day. Like all art, it has three aspects: that which belongs to yesterday, that which is timeless, that which is specifically of its own time. The exhibition is intended to show the timeless aspects.⁵⁰

As for the other aspects, that 'which has so much connection with today that this aspect overwhelms the others — such as Picasso's double images, which are the consequence not only of the art of the past but much more of psychology and the camera and new space-time concepts. . . . we will show this kind of connection in a later exhibition in the series.'⁵¹

Another example of the defensiveness of the modern art establishment is the name change on February 17, 1948 (the anniversary of the Armory show), of the Institute of Modern Art in Boston to the Institute of Contemporary Art. The explanatory statement indicated that:

Modern art failed to speak clearly. . . . there emerged a general cult of bewilderment. Once the gap between artist and public has widened sufficiently, it became an attractive playground for double talk, opportunism, and chicanery at the public expense. . . . 'Modern Art,' denoting simply the art of our times, came to signify for millions something unintelligible, even meaningless. Today, however, 'modern art' . . . has become both dated and academic.

Lest this pronouncement be interpreted as 'an invitation to reaction,' the museum stated:

We are unalterably opposed to extremism of the die-hard conservative kind. . . . Our endorsement will take the form of exhibition, publication, and where possible, the effective integration of art with commerce and industry.⁵²

These attacks on modern art and knuckling under by the chief exhibitioners were obviously not the only voices heard throughout the decade. Clement Greenberg, writing in *The Nation*, noted that 'The spreading recognition in this country of the fact that its most significant art is tending to become more and more exclusively abstract — and has begun to provoke a determined counter-reaction.' He lists a series of events, among them the name change of the Boston museum, and somewhat pessimistically points to the division between mass culture and high art audiences:

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As for the public — which public? The millions who, as the institute says, find 'modern art' something unintelligible and even meaningless? Those same millions also prefer Norman Rockwell to Courbet, and neither the Institute of Contemporary Art nor any other institution will in our day and age ever persuade them to comprehend the standards that make Courbet the one to be preferred.⁵⁴

The artist Stuart Davis wrote a less condescending reply to George Biddle. Davis points out that Biddle's arguments 'go far beyond any mere quibble about styles in painting.'⁵⁴ He disputes the notion that modern art is 'escapist' and 'Ivory Tower' — it 'has had repercussions in all parts of the civilized world on aesthetic perception and industrial design.' As for the participation of the masses:

Modern Art does speak a common language to thousands who have had the opportunity to cultivate it. It will become part of the common art language of the masses as opportunity for participation in authentic art experience is made available to them. But that language cannot be formulated in terms of their relative illiteracy in art and the prejudices resulting from it. . . . To assume incapacity on the part of the masses for the fullest cultural growth is incompatible with belief in the democratic principle.⁵⁵

Davis also takes on the question of censorship. Although examples of outright suppression or destruction of art in the United States are infrequent, there have been a number of them, most notably the destruction of Diego Rivera's mural in the Rockefeller Center in 1933. However much more common is the form of indirect censorship of agencies of sponsorship and distribution,

in whose policies, the artist has little voice. These policies, which both reflect and create public opinion, react directly on the economic status of the artist and on his aesthetic orientation. Overt suppression is only the cruder form of censorship; the preferred instruments of coercion are propaganda and economic attrition.⁵⁶

What type of propaganda? Davis traces the way in which isolationist thought is connected with the tendency of Americans to view 'abstraction' with suspicion.

Business approves of art, yes, but an art of the status quo to soothe the public mind and keep it on the beam. An art of the glorified familiar and spiritual nostalgia in reverse. And by all means a one-hundred-percent American art purged of the dangerous thoughts of foreign isms, an isolationist art singing the American Way of Life.⁵⁷

Sentiment for an isolationist culture has been rallied

round the slogan of 'The American Scene.' Through institutional and individual propaganda, a school of illustrative painting has been created and patronized and has attained an almost official status.⁵⁸ This is what exercises a censorship in our channels of art communication:

It is not that the American artist is prevented from painting any way he chooses, but that he faces a public preconditioned to look with suspicion on anything beyond the literal, the sentimental, or the academic . . . The American Scene philosophy parallels political isolationism in its desire to preserve the status quo of the American Way of Life.

He continues:

For many years past such men as Thomas Craven, Peyton Boswell, Jr., editor of Art Digest, Forbes Watson, and many others have been propagating their versions of the American Scene idea. Through books, magazines, newspapers, and lectures they reach a vast audience which is told that Modern Art is un-American and devoid of content. The Modern artist is outlawed and deprived of cultural citizenship, and the idea of democracy in culture goes down the drain. The relations between art and politics are devious, and often obscure, but they exist. The American Scene ideology has in it germs which the fascist-minded among us may find it profitable to cultivate.⁵⁹

In conclusion, although many of the attacks on modern art pander to the lowest common denominator, anti-intellectualism, xenophobia and redbaiting, they still point to the very real class nature of artistic taste, the gap between high and mass culture. The nostalgia for a pre-industrial past and its representational forms (portraiture, illusionism) is a reaction against the economic, social and technological change which is represented in and by both modernism and mass culture.

Can we learn anything from the attacks on modernism in the Forties? We seem to be entering into an era (Cold War II) where both financial and ideological assaults on the arts in general, and, as the quote cited earlier from the Denver paper seems to indicate, on modernism in particular, are being renewed with vigour. It is clear from the past and the present that such attacks are political, although they often disguise themselves in 'purely aesthetic' argumentation, and must be met with a political response. If this is so, then those of us who wish to live in an atmosphere which allows for artistic freedom and experimentation must not dismiss such critiques as mere Philistinism, retreating into elitism and snobbery. It is up

to us to connect the struggle for experimentation in art to other forms of economic, political and cultural democracy.

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Notes

- 1 Linda Nochlin, *Realism*, Baltimore: Penguin, 1975, pp 240-241.
- 2 This was noted by Arnold Hauser, when, after describing the special properties of the cinematic medium, he lamented that 'directors and cameramen are concentrating their attention, under the pressure of a second, already less film-minded generation, on the clear, smooth and exciting narration of a story and believe they can learn more from the masters of the *pièce bien faite* than from the masters of the silent film,' Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, New York, Vintage, 1951, IV, p 252.
- 3 This and the quotes which follow are from Oliver Larkin, 'Domesticating Modern Art,' *The Saturday Review of Literature*, 15 July 1939, p 8.
- 4 Ralph M. Pearson, 'A Modernist Explains Modern Art,' *New York Times Magazine*, 1 Sept. 1946, p 59.
- 5 Saul Helfgott, 'Peoples Iss Nuts Youst Lak Monkeys Iss,' *Senior Scholastic*, 20 Oct. 1948, p 22.
- 6 George Biddle, 'The Victory and Defeat of Modernism,' *Harper's*, June 1943, p 34.
- 7 *ibid.*, p 36.
- 8 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1970, p 234.
- 9 *ibid.*, p 36.
- 10 Arnold Hauser, p 251.
- 11 Stephen Heath, 'Narrative Space,' *Screen*, Vol 17 No 3 Autumn 1976, p 68.
- 12 *ibid.*, pp 69, 70.
- 13 *ibid.*, p 71.
- 14 Francis Iles, *Before the Fact*, London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1952, p 265.
- 15 *Time*, 9 Feb. 1948, pp 93-94.
- 16 Russell W. Davenport and Winthrop Sargeant, 'A Life Round Table on Modern Art,' *Life*, 11 Oct. 1948, p 78.
- 17 Thomas Job, temporary script, UA collection, University of Wisconsin centre for Theater Research.
- 18 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*, *op cit.*
- 19 Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, I, *op cit* p 87.
- 20 *ibid.*, p 119
- 21 Friedlander, *Landscape, Portrait, Still-Life: Their Origin and Development* New York: Philosophical Library, 1963, p 234.
- 22 Remy G. Saisselin, *Style, Truth and the Portrait*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1963, p 2.
- 23 Friedlander, *op cit* p 238.
- 24 H. W. Janson, *The History of Art* Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. and New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1967, p 246.
- 25 Among these functions Saisselin includes an historical record, an instrument of glorification, the remembrance of loved ones, tokens of friendship and the gratification of vanity. Saisselin, p 2.

- 26 According to Janson, 'Not until the Master of Flemalle — the first artist since antiquity to have real command of a close-range view of the human face from a $\frac{3}{4}$ angle, did the portrait play a major role in Northern painting.' Janson, p 291. Friedlander also links the development of the three-quarter profile with illusion, p 236.
- 27 *ibid*, p 292.
- 28 E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1960, p 95.
- 29 Janson, *op cit*, p 474.
- 30 Saisselin, *op cit*, p 23.
- 31 Saisselin, *op cit*, p 22.
- 32 Saisselin, *op cit*, p 24.
- 33 Saisselin, preface by Sherman E. Lee, dated May 11, 1963.
- 34 Margaret Carpenter, *Experiment Perilous*, Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1943, pp 71-72.
- 35 S. J. Woolf, 'Is It Art or Is It Double Talk?' *New York Times Magazine*, 14 April 1946, pp 22-23, 59.
- 36 Letter from Gregory Mason, in 'I Say It's Art' — 'I Say It's Double Talk!,' *New York Times Magazine*, 28 April 1946, pp 53-54.
- 37 'The Modern Art Racket', *Newsweek*, 27 Oct. 1947, p 99 somewhat sarcastically reviews the book. For example, 'No worshipper of history, he considered the Victorian age 'an exciting world, stripped of the darkness, of superstition and ignorance' whose 'middle classes needed no supernatural dressings to replace the precise knowledge by which science explained its beauty and wonder.'"
- 38 T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings, 'Dilemma: the perils of making a cult of the modern,' *House Beautiful*, Dec. 1946, pp 216-217.
- 39 Quoted in 'Beautiful or Beastly?', *Newsweek*, 14 Aug. 1944, p 92.
- 40 From Rt. Rev. Paul Wilhelm von Keppler, *More Joy*, tr. Rev. Joseph McSorley, St. Louis, B. Herder, excerpted as 'Purpose of Art' in *Catholic World*, May 1947, p 172.
- 41 Quoted in 'Paintbrush and Sickie,' *Time*, 25 Feb. 1946, p 40.
- 42 Cited in Stephen Gascoyne, 'ACLU vs. Moon Mullins,' *Westword*, 1981.
- 43 Francis Henry Taylor, 'Modern Art and the Dignity of Man,' *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1948, p 53.
- 44 *ibid*, p 56.
- 45 Cited in Stuart Davis, 'What About Modern Art and Democracy?' *Harper's*, December 1943, p 21.
- 46 Taylor, *op cit*, p 56.
- 47 *ibid*, p 56.
- 48 Anita Brenner, 'Can Both Be Art?' *New York Times Magazine*, 28 Jan. 1940, p 4.
- 49 Aline B. Louchheim, 'Modern Art? Not So Modern,' *The New York Times Magazine*, 21 Nov. 1948, p 50.
- 50 *ibid*, p 51.
- 51 *ibid*
- 52 Cited in 'Modern Into Contemporary,' *Newsweek*, 1 March 1948, p 73.
- 53 Clement Greenberg, *The Nation*, 6 March 1948, p 285.
- 54 Stuart Davis, *Harper's*, *op cit* p 16.
- 55 *ibid*, p 17.

- 56 *ibid.*, p 17.
57 *ibid.*, p 20.
58 *ibid.*, p 21.
59 *ibid.*, p 21.

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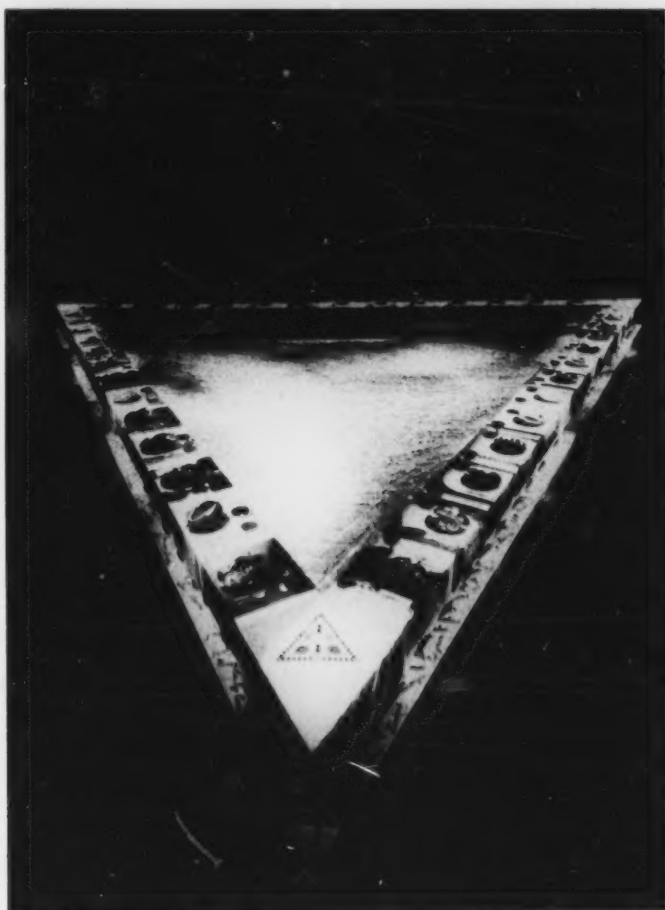
CRITICAL CONTRADICTIONS: Media Representations of *The Dinner Party* as 'feminist art'

MARIE GILLESPIE AND SYLVIA HINES

The Dinner Party is a massive triangular table laid with 39 places each of which includes a runner, cutlery, a goblet, and a plate. Intended as a 'reinterpretation of the Last Supper from the point of view of those who had done the cooking throughout history'¹, it uses the traditional crafts of ceramics, china painting and embroidery practised in recent times particularly by women. Each setting is a symbolic representation of a woman of achievement in the history of Western Civilisation. Thirty-seven of the plates use vulvate imagery which changes from flat ceramic painting to sculpted three-dimensional plates to represent the most contemporary women. Only one of the women represented is black. The floor in the middle of the table is constructed from hand-crafted tiles, with the names of a further 999 women radiating from the place names.

In recent years *The Dinner Party* has been widely used as an example of feminist art practice in the discourses of both the popular media and art criticism. Its production company, the Through the Flower Corporation, has also consistently promoted it as feminist art.

In claiming for itself this status, *The Dinner Party* potentially challenges certain culturally dominant myths on which the institution of art is founded. Firstly, that art has its source in the creative imagination (not skill) of the embattled genius — and in modern times — is produced in struggling isolation and solitude: over 400 women and men contributed their voluntary labour to this piece of 'art'. The proper content of art is also held to be apolitical, even if formally challenging: *The Dinner Party* has a clear



political intent. Art's address is to the individuated subject, its meaning unproblematically available to those with the necessary niceties of perception, sensibility and education: *The Dinner Party* makes its address to a potentially politicized grouping rather than to the atomized individual.

It has also generated a substantial body of commentary and critical analysis, some adulatory and some profoundly critical — the latter coming particularly from the women's movement². The aim of this article, however, is not to examine the reviewers' value judgements about its worth as feminist art, but to examine a number of media representations of the piece and to consider how they construct and articulate the relationship between the discourses of feminism and art. Finally, we hope to illustrate how the analysis of media representations can

offer valuable insights into the nature of both art and feminism, as well as opening up a new critical space which has wide implications for the study of art. We will look at a documentary about the making of *The Dinner Party* (*Right Out of History*³); the brochure that accompanied its exhibition at the Donmar Warehouse in London in 1985⁴; a short item in a Channel Four news broadcast⁵; and the press reviews of the London exhibition.

Right Out of History is part of a particular tradition of feminist documentary film-making closely associated with the consciousness-raising groups of the women's movement. It is a tradition characterized by the use of a 'realist' aesthetic, a close identification of the film-makers with their subjects, a privileging of women's experience and an address to a female audience. Many such films, with a clear political intent, have grown out of — and been extensively used within — the Women's movement⁶. Yet *Right Out of History* is also an art documentary, which has a very different tradition and usage. Melding two very different styles in this way creates a tension between the collective, artisanal, participatory modes of production privileged within feminism and the individualism of the solitary artist.

The film can be divided into three parts. First is an expository sequence in which Judy Chicago relates the overall rationale of the project and in which the narrative enigma is set. The second section, structured around a series of mini dinner parties involving women on the project, depicts the production process and is contained within the narrow space of the art studio. The final part deals with the finished work of art, the opening of the exhibition and the responses of some of the guests.

The status of *The Dinner Party* as 'art' is established in the film primarily through the construction of an individual auteur: Judy Chicago. Indeed its story is completely enclosed in *hers*, the only one of the many men and women working on the project who have a biography within the film. The expository sequence firmly establishes her primacy. Opening with a shot of her skipping, only half visible through an open doorway, the narrative enigma is set. The spectator's activity becomes a quest to know more about her and her project. Before we meet any other characters, she outlines her aims and the film cuts immediately to shots of the production process well underway. This compression of time and omission of the process of recruiting volunteers and funding the project, constructs it as springing unproblematically from Chicago's will and vision. However, constructing Chicago in this

way as the film's 'star' — a familiar technique within the art documentary — sits uneasily in the feminist documentary format, and the film thus attempts to articulate a vision of Chicago as a star, auteur and feminist. She is frequently seen discussing feminist politics with other women and even challenges theirs for what she claims is a lack of theoretical rigour.

The film presents Chicago's aim as being to reclaim the female crafts of embroidery, needlework and ceramics. Not only does she claim this for herself, but a relatively large amount of screen time is given to sequences of her visiting china-painting exhibitions and talking to a number of craftswomen. This aim, however, proves unassimilable with the presentation of her as artist and auteur. For whilst the project's intention may well have been to elevate craft to the status of art, the film actually structures a strong opposition between the two and a distinct hierarchy of value and status attaches itself to the various competences and skills — both intellectual and practical — of the other women.

Chicago, for instance, is often critical of the artistic aspirations of her co-workers, and suggests at one point that some of them are in a state of 'total fantasy' about themselves as 'artists'. Shots of her working typically represent her engaged in fine art detail rather than the heavy construction work or the less satisfying 'skillful' areas of work defined as craft. When shown with other characters the context is more often one of conflict than harmony: indeed, in the central narrative segment the harmony of the project is frequently punctured by disruptions and heated arguments about the hierarchical and inequitable division of labour. Depending on the ideological position of the spectator this may be read as either part of the struggle of the artist in realizing her vision, or as contradictory and disturbing to the feminist ethos of the project. These conflicts are dispelled as the group prepares for the opening of the exhibition and the film moves towards its narrative closure.

In this final section, which foregrounds the finished work of art, the stylistic qualities of the art documentary are dominant. John Roberts⁷ points out that this genre on television has actually been seen as beset with a 'transmission problem': a sense that 'Art itself on television, is at best...a tease, an introduction not a substitute for the real thing'⁸. The aura of *The Dinner Party* — its uniqueness and unreproducibility — largely comes from the combination of its physical immensity with its fine detail. Most visitors report that it is experience of this size and its nearness

which they find particularly moving: even a number of profoundly critical pieces speak of this aspect positively and with appreciation. While the film attempts to convey this by lingering pans around the table, bolstered by a musical soundtrack which evokes a sense of pomp and pageantry, it can only offer us a representation: *The Dinner Party* as experience remains necessarily distant and inaccessible.

This need not be considered a failing. As Roberts suggests, this very distance from the bewitching aura can open up a productive space for critical analysis, moving us away from liberal discussion of the work of art as emotional experience and creating the possibility for analysis of it as commodity: the product of intensive labour. The extended and highly intensive labour that *The Dinner Party* necessitated is represented in the film through numerous montage sequences, interviews with the women workers about what they are doing, and through the frequent arguments about the rigid allocation of tasks.

Although these conflicts are suppressed in the final narrative section, they still open the way for a reading of the relations of production on the project as hierarchical, exploitative and alienating. This problematizes any overall validation of the project as 'feminist', whilst still, in the very representation of this labour process challenging a

2. *The Dinner Party*
— the place settings
symbolically
represent
individual women
of achievement.



bourgeois definition of art as a spontaneous overflow of powerful creativity. The tensions produced in *Right Out of History* through the combination of elements of the generic traditions of the feminist documentary and the art documentary thus serve fundamentally to destabilise its presentation of *The Dinner Party* as 'feminist art.'

The remaining texts that we consider relate to the London exhibition of *The Dinner Party* in 1985. The brochure accompanying the show was produced by the feminist company which financed the exhibitions in Edinburgh and then London, and is part of the general promotion of the piece. Its function is to be informative and to give the visitor a memento to take home — a memento which then operates as a sign for particular social groupings, giving its owner 'cultured' or feminist credentials. It firmly situates the piece within a fine art, rather than a craft tradition and the major part of it is a reproduction of the 39 plates.

In contrast to the documentary film where there is always a tension between the feminist and the art discourses, in the brochure this is smoothed over. Chicago is again presented as auteur, but the guiding principle is now not will and intent but spiritual, prophetic vision. The equilateral triangle on the cover symbolises, we are told 'an equalized world'⁹ and the catalogue reproduces the banners that flanked the entrance to the exhibition, each of which carries an embroidered phrase:

*And she gathered all before her
And she made for them a sign to see
And lo they saw a vision
From this day forth
Like to like in all things
And then all that divided them merged
And then everywhere was Eden once again*

The tension has thus been resolved by suppressing the political edge of feminism: we are now in a world which is at once utopian and essentialist, affirming 'the feminine principle and spirit within each human being'¹⁰ and leaving no space for analysis of social and political realities and categories of difference. Thus the project is constructed as an almost religious, cult enterprise, and the 'she' who made for them a sign to see can be read not only as the Goddess but as Chicago herself. Certainly the project's claimed feminism has become totally subsumed in a universalising, semi-religious conception of art.

Occasionally, art makes news. It is usually the 'priceless' painting that has been stolen, or the higher-than-ever-

prices raised at the latest auction. Yet it is also news when art ceases to be art — when it transgresses the boundaries of what is acceptable to common-sense and good taste. Public opinion is thus mobilized around the 'excesses' of the avant-garde: the acquisition of Carl Andre's bricks by the Tate in 1976, for example, or the exhibition of Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* at the ICA in the same year. In this instance the privileged voice in art's discussion ceases to be that of the 'critic' — so important in most documentaries on art — and becomes that of the 'common-man', who voices populist, common-sense objections to the excesses of the liberal establishments which have funded or otherwise supported such 'nonsense'.

ITN News covered the opening of the exhibition in just such a way in an item on the Channel Four 7pm news programme, framing the discourses of Chicago and the appreciative audience (two female, one male) within a sceptical male discourse. Introduced by the news presenter as 'bound to cause controversy' the (male) reporter then gave a description of it in which each term was presented with an ironic qualifier: '*The Dinner Party* is, if nothing else, a big piece'; the 39 place settings are 'apparently meant to represent' women of achievement; 'there's nothing particularly coy about the female nature

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3. Nothing particularly coy about the nature of the female symbolism — ITN 7pm News, Channel Four (1.3.85)



of the symbolism'. And whilst Chicago is still represented as the sole author, it is not her creative vision, but something she has 'dreamt up'. The discourse of 'art' here, then, is a traditional one: *The Dinner Party* is 'feminism', an 'other' sufficiently threatening not only to need to be contained, but also to be ridiculed. The item closes with statements from the three people who have seen the exhibition, cut together without interjection from the reporter, and with the two men who happen to be passing by outside. The first, conveniently wearing a cloth cap, in response to a prompt which we do not hear, describes it as a 'con-job'; the second, at the wheel of his lorry, 'thought it was a new restaurant, for a dinner like, y'know'. The idea of the con-job is interesting: it is presented as a comment on *The Dinner Party* itself, when of course, never having seen it, it can only be a comment on the unlikelihood of the venue.

The Dinner Party was reviewed in *The Observer*, *Art Monthly* and in a number of radical magazines — *Spare Rib*, *Feminist Art News* and *Artrage*. There were also two lengthy, adulatory pieces in *City Limits*. The radical press were the most critical reviewers, convincingly and extensively critiquing the representational politics of the piece. The establishment response was, in fact, more favourable: indeed, the presentation of the project as the work of a feminist author fell very well into the dominant approach of bourgeois art criticism. Jane Lott in *The Observer* described Chicago as 'an artist strong-minded enough to do without husband, family, conventional support structures, because they would have got in the way of her concentration on her work' and went on to quote her as saying 'I often wish I were a lesbian: it would make things easier'¹¹. The review thus accepts a statement of feminist intent as sufficient for the definition of feminist art, ignoring political questions about whether the iconography or production practice of the piece can be considered feminist, in favour of a biographical construction of Chicago as feminist author.

Margaret Gartlake in *Art Monthly* is one of the few reviewers to consider the project's ostensible aim to elevate female crafts to the status of art¹². She suggests that the whole 'razamatazz' surrounding the piece is needed precisely to sustain this idea, one which is fundamentally flawed in its attempt to take crafts from one particular historical conjuncture and transpose them into another: the forms of china-painting and embroidery, 'lack social or symbolic functions today'¹³. This is an important point, and one which brings out the actual ahistoricism of

this supposedly historical project. It is because of this failure that, although she finds the work impressive in terms of 'high-art' technique, she feels that 'its place is within the history of feminism rather than that of art'¹⁴.

Media representations can, thus, serve as complex systems of interrogation not only of a particular work but also of the critical paradigms into which it is received. In foregrounding *The Dinner Party* as 'feminist art' for example, the representations we have looked at have problematized both feminist art practice and that of the mainstream art world: their analysis reveals a range of responses that can inform debates on the place and function of feminism in relation to art practice and more broadly to culture and society in general. It may also provoke a critical engagement with the relationship between the art work and the spectator: an area well developed in film theory but less so in art theory and which is crucial in moving feminist debate away from notions of 'essential' femininity.

Ultimately, studying media representations of 'feminist art' may deliver more insights into the hidden assumptions and values of the mainstream art world and its critical reviewing systems than reveal any 'truths' about feminist art practice, which is as diverse and dynamic as the (establishment) art world it seeks to challenge.

Notes

- 1 Judy Chicago, as quoted in the (untitled, unattributed) brochure accompanying the exhibition of *The Dinner Party* in London March 1st — May 26th 1985 (produced by Diehard Productions/Through the Flower Corporation, place of publication and date unspecified) p.2.
- 2 See for example Karin Woodley 'The Inner Sanctum' in *Artrage* 9-10 1985.
- 3 *Right Out of History: The Making of Judy Chicago's Dinner Party* (Johanna Demetrakas, USA, 1980).
- 4 London brochure, *op. cit.*
- 5 ITN News, Channel Four, 7pm, 1.3.85.
- 6 For further information on this style of documentary (and some feminist criticisms of its aesthetic) see Charlotte Brunsden (ed) *Films for Women* (London, BFI, 1986), Part One.
- 7 John Roberts 'Postmodernism, Television and the Visual Arts', *Screen* Vol 28 No 2 Spring 1987, reprinted in this volume, pp 47-62.
- 8 Nigel Finch cited in Roberts, *ibid.*
- 9 London brochure, *op.cit.* p.3.
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 Jane Lott, 'Women put in their plate', *The Observer*, 10.3.85.
- 12 Margaret Gartlake, 'Judy Chicago's Dinner Party', *Art Monthly*, no 85, April 1985, pp 17-18.
- 13 *ibid.*, p 18.
- 14 *ibid.*

ART AND IMAGES OF WOMEN

An interview with Gina Newson

SYLVIA PASKIN

Amongst the programmes Gina Newson has directed (including *Vital Statistics* for BBC's *Man Alive* slot in 1980, *Body Images* for Thames TV's *Take Six* series in 1981 and three of the documentaries in Channel Four's 1986 *Open The Box* series¹; there have been several in collaboration with art historian Marina Warner — *Joan of Arc* (1983), *Imaginary Women* (1985) and *The Surreal Muse* (1988), all of which have been made for Channel Four.

In *Imaginary Women*, which forms the basis for this interview, Newson eschews the normal narrow conventions of art documentary. There is no sense of 'Art' being presented to us as a repository of absolute and essential values, or of an elitist view of the artist as a purveyor of enduring truths; instead she presents it as working allusively for a plurality of meanings. The critical focus for this innovative and absorbing programme is provided by Marina Warner's ideas about the female form in art. In her book, *Monuments and Maidens*², she shows how throughout history, the female body has been used allegorically to embody abstract virtues such as liberty, glory, victory, and so on. However, the programme is less concerned with analyzing the shortcomings of the past than showing the ways in which various contemporary women artists (in the broadest sense of the word since the programme includes contributions from the actress/singer Toyah Wilcox, the dancer Gaby Agis, the fashion designer Katharine Hamnett and the sculptor Kate Blackner) are seeking to create and define art on their own terms and to distil their own visual language. As Kate Blackner puts it 'we cannot obliterate the past but we can subvert it'. Once the initial thesis has been stated the remainder of *Imaginary Women* comprises

the unfolding and development of an argument set against a dinner party (shades of Judy Chicago) where the group of women artists present are engaged in a discussion about what their art means to them as women and as artists. Helen Chadwick, whose work uses images of her naked body, raises a debate on how women can do this without pandering to the rapaciousness of the male gaze and this issue is argued with some heat throughout the programme without however reaching any resolution.

The dinner party scene gives us a sense of art as a shared and collective process that offers the possibility of leading to social change rather than concentrating on the usual notion of art as an individual and self limiting enterprise. The dinner party conversation itself is constantly intercut with other images — dance sequences, pictures from exhibitions, pop videos, clips from films and advertisements; and this host of images is carefully selected and juxtaposed to create other narratives within the main narrative. This notion of the power and significance of visual images (in themselves) is central to *Imaginary Women* and this complex assemblage of images is the mark of a director who has developed a distinctive visual form which is in itself a fascinating example of the visual language the programme sets out to explore.

Interview

SP: *You are perhaps best known for your documentary work with Marina Warner. Did your interest in making documentaries about art precede this or develop out of the collaborations?*

GN: No, I'd already made a programme about the Mona Lisa called *Have You Seen The Mona Lisa?* which was about the difficulty of seeing the original behind a glass protective screen in The Louvre and the proliferation of images of the Mona Lisa everywhere, on all sorts of objects. It was an exploration of reality and reproduction in art and raised questions about High and Low Art. I find the contradictions very challenging.

SP: *What particular aspect of making arts documentaries interests you?*

GN: This is difficult to talk about in a general way but I've always been interested in the 'meaning' of the image whether in art, photography or images in the culture generally. How they come to be, how we read them, what the interplay is in the culture between ourselves and their meaning. Putting art on television is another level of interest. How do you frame the image itself? You are exploring issues about something and using the medium

itself which is constructed of images — how do you create a language which plays with the two?

SP: *Your work with Marina Warner has concentrated on issues of female artists and representations of women. Do you feel you are approaching these areas from a distinctly new perspective from established TV and film arts coverage?*

GN: I think this is very hard for me to answer without being self-congratulatory. Other people can probably comment on this better than me. It's too close to me.

SP: *I noticed in Imaginary Women, but also in a number of your other programmes too, you use a lot of clips from videos and films etc.*

GN: I like the idea of using all these 'quotes', using several languages at the same time. First of all it has the quality of reflexivity — you can use a clip to make an ironic comment on its context. Quotes themselves have their own reverberations as well as being rather playful. Also, since the work itself is very constructed, the drive is normally towards making the work seamless and invisible. I like to have moments where the seams show so people are aware of what I am doing.

SP: *How did you come to make Imaginary Women?*

GN: Marina and I had already collaborated on *Joan of Arc* and *Imaginary Women* evolved out of her book *Monuments and Maidens*. Her ideas fascinated me because she had uncovered a way in which women are presented as passive symbols, a way which is buried deep in our culture and yet which is part of our everyday life. I was not interested, however, in making a film of the book. I wanted to unfold and interweave an argument so I used Marina's ideas about the way the female form has been used in this passive, allegorical way like the quasi-invisible statues in the city to investigate women artists who are involved in making their own meanings, re-creating the female form in their own image. I certainly did not want to make a film just about Marina and the statues.

SP: *In making Imaginary Women you seem to have validated all the women artists in the programme, was this conscious on your part?*

GN: Yes, it was, very much so. I followed the same principle as I did in making *Have you seen the Mona Lisa?* where I gave equal weight and equal status to all the people who loved her whether it was the curator of The Louvre, or the man who guarded the portrait for more than eighty years, and his wife, who completed over eighty portraits of her husband and the Mona Lisa, or the craftsman Leo Vala who makes reproductions of the Mona

Lisa which he claims are 'better than the original in some ways'. I was conscious in making *Imaginary Women* that the women artists were collaborating — that they had things in common and things that were different but they had the same objective. I wanted to allow them all time and space to articulate and elaborate their views and to discuss them.

SP: *Is that why you used the idea of a dinner party? Was it an attempt to break down the authoritative format of presenter/interviewee in favour of something more spontaneous? How well did you think it worked?*

GN: I think I used the idea of a dinner party as part of the structure of the programme for many different reasons. First both Marina and I had been up at Edinburgh independently and had seen Judy Chicago's exhibition *The Dinner Party* and I saw that the women represented there were only being celebrated after they had died. I thought I would have the women in the programme alive, eating, talking, discussing, not static in any way. I also wanted to avoid being in any way hierarchical. The dinner party avoided the trap of having too authoritative a voice, or just talking heads. I have tried to create a situation where the interviewer, as it was, overheard what was going on, and I think it worked well.

1. Different presences — woman as icon and producer in Imaginary Women.



SP: *I think you may have answered my next question. How much does the formal approach you use arise out of the critical perspective you adopt or how much does the style of the programmes determine the critical perspective?*

GN: I think it is the critical perspective I adopt which determines the form of the programme.

SP: *What about future projects. Do you intend to continue work on and about female artists and issues of female representation or would you like to take a critical look at any aspects of male artists and the traditional male domination of artistic production?*

GN: Well, my next programme will be about the Surrealist writer and artist Leonora Carrington.

SP: *In making this documentary, are you concerned to emphasize and elevate the status of a neglected female artist? Don't you think there is a danger in doing this that you will create a female pantheon, as it were?*

GN: I don't think about the Leonora Carrington programme from that particular perspective ie reclaiming a neglected female artist. First of all, it is not going to be a straight documentary, it will be fictionalized, it's about the idea of the muse that the Surrealists had. In the film, a director chooses a girl, an unknown art student, to be the actress for his film — to play the part of the real Leonora Carrington who was considered by the Surrealists to be one of their muses, though she was a significant writer and artist in her own right. The young actress meets the real Leonora Carrington who is living in New York today, and a relationship develops between them. The girl who is to play the part of Leonora realizes that she too has been put into the position of a muse by the director, as an inspiration to the artist, and she decides subsequently to reject the part. The programme celebrates Leonora Carrington too as an artist, a working artist with a very rich and fascinating life.

SP: *The relationship between documentary and fiction is obviously going to be an important element of the film. What will it allow you to do?*

GN: It is going to be a new development for me but really all my films are very constructed, they are assembled in the cutting room. In making documentaries, and this is something I explored in *Real People*, we ask people to enact themselves as real people. In this film fact and fiction all meet — since an actress playing the part of Leonora Carrington will meet the real Leonora Carrington, it should be an interesting moment.

SP: *I know you are working on several other projects. Are they also about women artists?*

GN: Not at all. I've just finished making two other programmes for Channel Four. They are called *Frames* and *Titles*. They are both about the edges of art; the elements of art which tend to be invisible but which are actually in a very interesting space that exists between the art, the art object which hangs on the wall, and the spectator. In the space between is the 'title' which exists in language. So it is about what happens when we go into a gallery to look at work and how language interferes. It is trying to look at the interplay. The other one is about 'frames' both literally and metaphorically. The frame has a meaning as a sign.

SP: *What do you think is the most important aspect of the kind of programmes you make?*

GN: There are definitely different preoccupations at different times, but to answer your question I would say that I make films as a way of exploring ideas that interest me, even if they are difficult, and I like to make them visible on television which, I have to say, is not a medium which makes it easy to tackle complex ideas.

Notes

- 1 'Real People', 'Episode 4169 — Enter Mickey Doyle' and 'Look at me when I'm talking to you'.
- 2 Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicols, 1985.

SCREENING PHOTOGRAPHY

ANDREA REHBERG

Any consideration of how the media construct representations of photography is at the same time necessarily an enquiry into current ways of thinking about photography itself. Current thinking about photography, whether by practitioners, critics and/or theoreticians, is at present beset by many problems and confusions. To extricate these in their entirety would be a gargantuan enterprise only possible within a wider enquiry into contemporary Western aesthetics. It is therefore only practical in this context to limit ourselves to defining, or at the very least *locating* the problematic; that is, the theoretical and ideological frameworks within which photography and its representations can be considered. In a parallel move, it has to be stated from the outset that the proliferation of films, television programmes and videos about photography over the last decade has rendered a comprehensive survey of the field similarly impracticable within this scope of this essay. What *is* possible however is to identify some typical and recurrent critical positions and (inter-related) representational strategies. The third proviso which has to be re-emphasized in preface to this discussion is that photography does not of course exist in a theoretical or social vacuum but is instead always the product of social and cultural circumstances. And although an analysis of the specific circumstances which determine the filmic discourses¹ under consideration is similarly beyond the scope of this piece, it is, nevertheless, also imperative to stress the significance of their social 'embeddedness'.

Although in the opening paragraph we implicitly assumed the existence of such a thing as 'photography-in-itself' (as if such an object was unproblematically given); we now need to withdraw this assumption in order to examine the nature of photography in greater depth. In

this act of sceptical enquiry we are in the best of company. In *Camera Lucida*², his reflections on photography first published in 1980, Roland Barthes noted how, when considering the key aspects of photographic practice, he was: 'overcome by an 'ontological' desire' and 'wanted to learn at all costs what Photography was 'in itself', by what essential feature it was to be distinguished from the community of images'². Though Barthes shares his 'ontological' desire with the majority of those who have attempted any serious reflection on the nature of photography (whether practical or theoretical); this desire is, at least in a psychoanalytic sense, always insatiable. Barthes undoubtedly knew this, we still have to learn.

A useful first step in this learning process is the displacement of the question as to what photography is 'in-itself' to that of the age old *cri de coeur* 'But is it Art?'. A cursory look at a media text such as Steven Dwoskin's documentary on Bill Brandt *Shadows From Light* (devoted largely to a consideration of Brandt's use of the female nude as subject), might seem to offer a decided and unproblematic affirmative. But extending the cursory glance into a critical enquiry proves illuminating. The

1. A cinematic journey through photographic atmosphere — Steven Dwoskin's *Shadows from Light*.



voice-over in Dwoskin's film begins with the words: 'This is cinematic journey through the photographic atmospheres of Bill Brandt'. Although this is not very precise it has a certain information value as it were, in spite of itself: impressions are collected during a 'journey' and an 'atmosphere' (an even more elusive concept) is the result of subjective experience. This rhetoric, by emphasizing the subjective and uncritical categories of impression and atmosphere, is firmly lodged within the discourse of modernism and in the uncritical realm of association which in turn presupposes that these photographs do not have to be analysed in any (systematic) way; that they are *a priori* art objects which simply afford pleasure though the act of the aesthetic contemplation. This seems to be the logic of Dwoskin's approach. But this logic, and indeed Dwoskin's discourse as a whole, rests on a number of exclusions, repressions even.

There is first of all omission of Brandt's other photographic work, most notably the photojournalism with which he made his name in the 1930s³ and which obviously introduced the dimension of the social into his photography. But Dwoskin's film, by concentrating almost

2. *Scopophilia
and the image
of the Nude in
Shadows from
Light.*



exclusively on Brandt's nudes, propels photography into the rarified 'atmosphere' of so-called 'pure' art. It is only by escaping into the edenic region that (the discourse on) photography can remain uncontaminated by intrusive questions about its social functions in general, of the hermeneutic problem of genres and of the photographic genre of nudes in particular. That these are female nudes places them in the context of the feminist debate about representations of women and femininity, and (arguably) into the economic category of pornography. But Dwoskin's film is seemingly unconcerned with such socio-political considerations; the nudes are offered as Brandt's own favourite subject and evidently also Dwoskin's (neither of which is apparently perceived as problematic) and it is their scopophilic approach to the nudes which becomes the chief self-legitimation device of the film.

It is only by disavowing any of the interrogatory (or even descriptive) functions usually ascribed to documentary ('impressionistic' or otherwise) that *Shadows from Light* can both propose itself as an artistic project in its own right and avoid considering any of the problems involved in assuming photography as 'art'. In terms of debates around the relation between photographic and fine art practice, *Shadows from Light* not only fails to establish any sort of credence for the equation of photography and art but also reveals the operations of exclusion and reification which make it possible to support this. Consideration of issues of technology (and technique) are significantly absent from *Shadows from Light* — passed over in favor of a concentration on the identity of the photographic 'author' and his photographic 'atmospheres'.

The second part of this discussion will explore the significance of such exclusions by examining the status of the object in media representations of photography, with reference to issues of technology, technique and the development of photography's practical functions. The 1975 BBC2 series *Pioneers of Photography* is particularly instructive in this respect. Consisting of eight parts of twenty-five minutes length with such fanciful titles as 'The Pencil of Nature' or 'The Fleeting Image', the series looks at early practitioners of photography in terms of their contributions to the development of the technical and scientific possibilities of photography. Here Henry Fox Talbot, Nicéphore Niepce and Louis Daguerre are (amongst others) placed at the starting point of a tradition that encompasses 'art photography' (a highly complex notion as we have seen) and the use of photography in the service of legal, scientific or scholarly practices. In other

words, photography is seen as essentially a *technique*. The question of what photography is (which is still a *leitmotif* for our discussion here) is suspended by the *Pioneers of Photography* series in favor of a view of photography's historical development as the purposeful linear unfolding of its technical potentialities. To sustain this view, the series has to perform three concurrent acts of constructing history, knowledge and the subject, where all three converge on the figure of the inventor as the point of origin.

In his essay on Nietzsche's genealogical approach to historical matters ('Nietzsche, Genealogy, History'⁴), Michel Foucault makes, among many other points, the distinction between two types of origin which are developed in the course of Nietzsche's writing and differentiated as *ursprung* and *herkunft*. The former can be summarized as a self-identical, 'intact' imaginary locus which contains 'the essence of things, their purest possibilities... immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession'⁵. The notion of *herkunft* on the other hand (a term which can also be rendered as 'descent'), does not operate on the assumption of a foundation or an unbroken continuity and instead 'disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent within itself'⁶. The tracing of an origin as *herkunft* is therefore a genealogical pursuit.

Using Foucault's schema as a guideline, the above mentioned 'pioneers of photography' are located by the discourse of the television series as originators in a manner which equates to the category of *ursprung*. This is historical projection (or, more properly, rejection, a 'throwing backward'⁷) is a necessary prerequisite for the obliteration of interest in the sphere of photography as technological knowledge. It is to give but one concrete example cited in 'The Pencil of Nature', that Henry Fox Talbot's photographs 'foreshadow many of the modern uses of photography — [eg] as legal evidence'. Thus the insertion of individuals into the discourse of the Law and State and their *subjection* to it with the help of photography, not only remains unquestioned when ironically it is currently one of the most controversial uses of the medium (with regard for instance to the documentation of riots); but even appears *inevitable*, since it is assumed to have existed *in statu nascendi* at the moment of inception of the whole photographic field. Thus photography's materiality or, more specifically, the material conditions and interests involved in any photographic production are

once more eradicated. But this process of eradication, whereby the history of a practice is reduced to a straight line linking a pure origin and a pure utility, leaves the burden of proof of its own inevitable nature with the figure of the inventor. In the above mentioned essay Foucault traces this burden-some displacement in very general terms in the discourse of the so-called 'Human Sciences' and quoting Nietzsche he sums up the effect of what can be termed a historical projection/rejection:

The lofty origin is no more than a 'metaphysical extension which arises from the belief that things are most precious and essential at the moment of birth' ...this is the moment of their greatest perfection, when they emerge dazzling from the hands of their creator...⁸.

With reference to this, we can then characterize the impulse that produces the discourse of the *Pioneers of Photography* series as a 'metaphysical extension'.

So far we have looked at some of the ways in which the filmic discourse on photography constructs its object, the implicit assumptions it makes about it and the complex, often forcible operations that are necessary for these constructions to pass themselves off as simply 'given', natural etc. This attention to the discrepancy between the self-effacing and seemingly transparent appearance of these discourses and their actual complex constructed reality provides an appropriate context for the reading of a significant group of media texts which epitomise a certain approach to the representation of cultural artefacts in this society. I am here referring to the BBC's 1982 series *Master Photographers*, a group of programmes which offer themselves for a reading in terms of what Foucault calls 'the author function'.

Here then, the discussion partially shifts to an enquiry into the status of the subject in representations of photography. In 1968 Roland Barthes polemically proclaimed the 'Death of the Author'⁹, that is, the exit of this figure as an (even *the*) explanatory, centralizing function from the stage or scene of writing (and more pertinently for our purposes here, from any system of signification). But in his article 'What is an author?'¹⁰ Foucault argues the need for caution and where Barthes would only see an open, endless play of signification on this newly liberated stage, Foucault suspects that the author presence still lurks in the wings, surreptitiously pulling the strings of the puppet 'author function' and argues that:

we should re-examine the empty space left by the author's disappearance; we should attentively observe, along its gaps..., its new demarcations, ...the reapportionment of this void; we should await the fluid functions released by this disappearance.¹¹

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photography

The homage paid to Alfred Eisenstaedt, Bill Brandt, Andreas Feiniger, Jacques-Henri Lartigue, Andre Kertész and Ansel Adams as 'master photographers' (ie masterful photographers as much as masters of their own photographic discourses) in the individual programmes in the series devoted to their individual work (from which their statements in the following four paragraphs are taken), obviously positions them squarely in the centre of the photographic stage; and in doing this patently fails to accommodate any of the profound implications of the debates noted above. The assumption on which Eisenstaedt, Brandt *et al* are selected as objects of the *Master Photographers* series is of course that their photography is the creative expression of something original, exceptional and unique and (by implication) that they themselves as individuals have these qualities too — in short that each of them are (photographic) 'geniuses'. This concentration does of course tend to block approaches to their work which are premised on more analytical bases (semiotic, political etc.) and implicitly sets up a general framework for considering photography which presents an obstacle to any form of theorization of the medium.

3. Creativity
and the social
embeddedness
of the
photographic
text (from
Return
Journey).



Allan Sekula sums up this state of affairs most succinctly when he observes that the 'invention of the 'photographer of genius' is possible only through a disassociation of the image-maker from the social embeddedness of the image'¹² (my emphasis). But not only the image itself is divorced from its social and cultural value. Here the process of disassociation also affects the image maker *himself* (sic), in so far as the socio-political configurations within which he produces photographs are relegated to the subordinate nature of a historical backdrop which merely provides certain photogenic materials.

This trivializing of history is for instance taken to its ultimate limits in one of the questions addressed to Alfred Eisenstaedt concerning his photograph of Hitler: 'How did you feel to photograph the man you must have hated so much?' (as if the atrocities of Nazi Germany could be reduced to a matter of personal animosity), to which Eisenstaedt replies: 'When I have a camera in my hand I don't know fear' (so much for his politics). The imaginary moment of spontaneous unique creation also finds its way into the portrayal of Jacques-Henri Lartigue as 'the perfect amateur photographer who simply photographs what he likes' where it is assumed that it is in the end Lartigue's privileged vision of 'life', 'reality' etc that legitimates and validates his own photographic discourse as well as the discourse about his work. In contradistinction to recent developments in the practice of the reading of texts¹³; in which subjectivity is considered an effect of discourse or representation, the *Master Photographers* series proposes a self-identical and non-contradictory subject outside the structuring forces of language and signification, in short, a transcendent subject which is situated in an almost mythical beyond of everyday life and semiotic processes alike, in a realm of genius, creativity and originality which appears to transcend analysis.

But while we can recognize how this approach functions to divert attention from the role of the photographer in society, it is equally important to note that the necessary corollary of this mystifying tendency is the projection of a particular model of the reception of photographic discourses. For if the onus of production is placed with the figure of the 'intact' originary subject, its concomitant is the presupposition of an equally unproblematic given, namely an entirely *passive* subject in the locus of an ideal reception; in other words, a *consumer* of photographs. It is for instance only from this position of an interpellated subject, gaping in awe and wonderment at the mysterious ways in which a photographer of genius works that the

question directed at Alfred Eisenstaedt, 'How did you feel... photographing all these very, very famous people?' makes any sense. The most socially significant aspect of assuming this 'immaculate reception' of photographs is a cultural division of labour. According to this view, a small minority of gifted individuals miraculously create masterpieces that merit celebration in the media while the rest of the population remain excluded, only able to produce in their own right as 'amateurs'.

In this respect the 1987 *Arena* programme on Jo Spence and her development of 'Phototherapy' marks an important point of departure. For although the programme retains the focus on the originary subject (in as much as Jo Spence is the cause of the documentary), its exploration of the techniques and uses of phototherapy is premised on their suitability for imitation. This has the effect of partially freeing the spectator from the passive position of consumer and making her or him at least a potential co-producer of photography, the means of which are available to everyone. The only reservation which has to be voiced about this approach concerns the nature of the confrontation between individuals and institutions (and most importantly in this instance the institutions of so-called health care). When diagnosed with breast cancer, Jo Spence found herself *dehumanised* (her word) by an overbearing patriarchally structured 'health' system that essentially knows three methods of treating cancer: surgery, radiation and chemotherapy, all of which effectively turn the body into a battlefield. In an attempt to regain the control of her body from the medical establishment and as a way of practically solving the problem of how to represent cancer outside the paradigm of passive suffering, Spence (with the help of Rosy Martin and others) developed and refined what she came to call phototherapy. In none too elaborately (or as she repeatedly stresses, expensively) set-up scenes, Spence acts out and thereby emotionally works through¹⁴ in front of the camera those scenes from her personal history that are perceived as crucially determining for the present state of her body and mind. In this enterprise there feature photographs as diverse as, to name but two, Spence posing as her mother in what would have been a typical domestic scene and a (posed) photograph of perspectively distorted, knife wielding, masked surgeons towering over the camera in a gesture that symbolically captures the alienation of the patient (sufferer)¹⁵.

Spence's cancer related work questions whether the medical system any longer has anything to do with 'care'

or, indeed, health. In this way, a practical photographic criticism is developed out of an institution that subjects and subjugates those who fall into its hands. This critical activity constitutes the liberating aspect of phototherapy; but at the same time the focus of activity remains with the originating individual as opposed to both the possibility of concerted action which would disrupt the very functioning of the state institutions and the possibility of a subject not constitutive of, but constituted in and by the processes of representation, in short a subject-in-process¹⁶. This points to some of the limitations of Jo Spence's phototherapeutic project. But this self-contradictory nature of phototherapy — both liberating and limited — is overshadowed (at least in contrast to the films discussed earlier), by the fact that the categories of photography as an art form and practice or as 'neutral' technique are entirely dispensed with in this programme in favour of a representation of photography as social production.

This dynamic view of photography is emphasized even more clearly in the 1982 documentary *Photomontage Today: Peter Kennard*. By its very nature photomontage foregrounds the constructed nature of visual images and, by extension the *constructedness* of subjectivity in representation. And in so far as, historically speaking, this form of photography has had its greatest impact as a means of questioning and disrupting the self-naturalizing representational discourses of dominant ideologies, it exists predominantly in opposition to dominant concepts of art and its corollaries of artist as genius, expressive creativity etc. Here John Heartfield's parodic deconstructions of the grandiose claims of the Third Reich (the most widely known being the 'Millions stand behind me' photomontage) remain the classic point of reference. But the references to Heartfield never regress into an uncritical reverence for a grand 'old master' of the genre. The techniques of photomontage are instead explored and explained in a way which renders them as a form of 'tool kit' for future uses. It is very much in this sense that Peter Kennard, one of the most prominent contemporary exponents of the genre (and probably best known for his anti-Nuclear collages) is used in the programme. He analyses, by way of looking at his own past work, what distinguishes a successful and 'powerful' photomontage from an unsuccessful or 'weak' one. This analysis takes him to the very heart of the complex and fundamentally contradictory nature of social reality, where the forces of disparity, or more properly, overdetermination¹⁷ can only be apprehended in a representational practice that opposes the

seemingly seamless nature of this reality with images that are themselves disparate and deliberately overdetermined.

In this context we must once more remind ourselves of Brecht's famous dictum

...less than at any time does a simple reproduction of reality tell us anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or GEC yields almost nothing about these institutions. Reality proper has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relationships, the factory, let's say, no longer reveals these relationships. Therefore something has actually to be constructed, something artificial, something set up¹⁸.

What is important to stress here, as much in the context of contemporary mass media uses of photography as social 'documents' (as in advertising for example); is the fact that photomontage as photography presents fundamental points of resistance for an appropriation which would seek to re-incorporate it into dominant ideology. It is in this sense too that the documentary is multiply (and occasionally simplistically) didactic in its investigation of the role and function of photomontage (and photography) in society; it problematizes the construction of the image (through divergent 'found' materials and their heterogeneous interaction in the photomontage) as well as the construction of the image-maker and reader in terms of the materiality of social processes. The deconstructive potential of photomontage is thereby located in its perception of representation not as displaced on to an ideal object or study, but as an intersubjective social process. *Photomontage Today* foregrounds the fact that photography (and image production in general) takes place in society and is party to the divergent and frequently opposing interests that inform political as much as representational practices in society. This formulation already points to the limitations of the underlying thesis of the film, in so far as it espouses a model of society that could be termed binary, or crudely dialectical.

A much more sophisticated elaboration of the issues raised by *Photomontage Today* can be found in Faction Films' *Picturing Derry*. This is not a film about a town in Northern Ireland nor simply about photography as something 'in-itself'. In that it is directly *about* anything (that is if its 'ontological' status can be determined in a fashion less complex than the processes that make up its discursive field), it is the posing of a question about the subject of enunciation and the subject of the enounced and the

complex interdependence of the two. Unlike *Photomontage Today* which is still based around the central voice of an artist (Kennard himself), *Picturing Derry* does not centre on any one authoritative account. Instead, a number of voices are heard throughout the film — those of international photo-journalists; of local Derry press photographers; of young unemployed people from Derry Camerawork (a community Workshop) and of the commentary. This last voice does not though offer a point of conclusion for the discussion in the sense of making definitive summary statements; but highlights instead the questions and problems which arise out of the juxtaposition of the other voices and the concrete photographic images of Derry.

This juxtaposition is a filmic representation of the multiple subject positions taken up vis-a-vis the photo-



4. An image from the war of pictures in *Picturing Derry*.

graphic discursive field 'Derry'. This is not to say that *Picturing Derry* proposes an independently given reality which simply finds its way into photographic representations (though we must note that Derry itself is in no way incidental to the film's discourse and is chiefly focused on because it epitomises a certain state of affairs which has 'generated a unique relationship between the image and politics'¹⁹. On the contrary, and herein lies the film's complexity, 'Derry' is never 'given' but always only produced by conflicting photographic representations of it, and possibly only produced in that gap or rupture of those ultimately politically motivated conflicts (which the film does not attempt to close). This is termed a 'war of pictures' in the film. To play on this metaphor, it is not the individual photographers who make up the rank and file in this 'war' but all the images that are enlisted in the services of this or that campaign in newspapers, colour supplements, gallery walls etc. They have no value in or of themselves but only slide into position in a specific context which only ever gives them contingent value and meaning. Simon Watney sums up this state of meaning very succinctly when he observes: 'in semiotic terms... meaning is use' to which he adds the important qualification '...as long as the concept of use is not reduced to the terms of political economy, understood as some pre-semiotic level of 'primary' determination'²⁰.

It is at this point that we can pick up afresh the Ariadne thread provided by Barthes' question of what photography in itself might be. Having worked through his initial 'ontological desire', Barthes comes to recognize that in that the photograph 'is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency' it is licit to speak of a photograph 'but improbable to speak of *the* Photograph'²¹. This provides the basis for the realization that to speak of photography as such (and implicitly its ideal creator or spectator) constitutes an act of extreme, ideologically motivated, mystification. A discourse which operates with the notion of, for example, the 'master photographer' does not in any real sense, tell us anything about its chosen subject other than that it exists and that it deserves admiration — it locks it firmly into the paradigm of art photography. In other words, it only provides a tautological, empty or flat knowledge of the subject of photography. In contradistinction to this, the progressive fragmentation that can be traced through the discourses on phototherapy and photomontage and in the disparate elements that make up *Picturing Derry* constitute the necessary precondition for any critical and productive thinking on photography.

What I hope to have shown here is a movement from mystification and the refusal to think its subject in a rigorous way in the discourses of *Shadows from Light*, *Pioneers of Photography* and *Master Photographers* to the progressive demystification of photographs and their increasing conceptual integration into their social modes of production in *Arena: Jo Spence, Photomontage Today: Peter Kennard*, and *Picturing Derry*. For epistemological as much as (in its broadest sense) political reasons, the concepts of photography as represented by contemporary media discourses have to free themselves from a number of fallacies. These include the notion of *originality* (which merely fetishizes a social product as 'art' object), the concept of teleological technology (which obscures the question of interest in the uses of photography) and the concept of the ideal (passive) spectator (which is premised on a notion of spectators being wholly constituted prior to the signifying processes which (in part) interpellate them). Many other subordinate fallacies could undoubtedly be enumerated, but these seem to be the chief structuring devices within Western thinking on photography; paradigms which any form of representational practice intent on moving beyond the traditional framework of western aesthetics must address itself to.

Notes

- 1 Although the term 'discourse' has been most often used with reference to written representation, this essay acknowledges the development of concepts of filmic (and televisual) texts and discourses developed within contemporary Film Studies; and applies its theoretical analyses within this framework. Cf also Allan Sekula who employs the notion of a photographic text to include 'the weighty, institutional character of the semiotic system that lurks behind any given icon' — Allan Sekula, 'On the invention of Photographic Meaning' in Victor Burgin (ed), *Thinking Photography*, London, Macmillan, 1982, p 85.
- 2 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, London, Fontana, 1984, p 3.
- 3 Cf also Michael Copeman 'Atmosphere' in *Screen*, May-June 1984, vol 25 No 3.
- 4 Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' in his *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1977.
- 5 *ibid.* p 142.
- 6 *ibid.* p 147.
- 7 Charles Rycroft, *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, London, Hogarth Press, 1983, p 125.
- 8 Michel Foucault *op.cit.* p 143.
- 9 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in his *Image, Music, Text* London, Fontana, 1977.
- 10 Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' in his *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, op.cit.* p 121.

- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 Allan Sekula *op.cit.* p 105.
- 13 I am thinking here mainly of the effects of the writings of Foucault, Barthes, Derrida and Kristeva.
- 14 See J. Laplanche and J-B Pontalis *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, London, Hogarth Press, 1985 p 488.
- 15 A scene which parallels the (more humorously constructed) dental surgery scenario in Richard Massingham's quasi-surrealist short film *Tell me (if it hurts)* (UK, 1934).
- 16 See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, London, Penguin, 1977.
- 17 In the sense defined by Ben Brewster in the glossary for his translation of Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, London, Verso, 1979, p 252.
- 18 As cited by Walter Benjamin in 'A short history of photography' in *Screen*, Spring 1972, vol 15 no 1, p 24.
- 19 Faction Films, 'Producing a Picture: Derry in Photography' in Patricia Holland, Janice Winship and Simon Watney (eds) *Photography/Politics Two*, London, Comedia, 1986, p 129.
- 20 Simon Watney, 'On the Institutions of Photography' in Patricia Holland *et al. op.cit.* pp 188-9.
- 21 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, London, Fontana, 1984 pp 4-5.

GARDENS OF SPECULATION Landscape in *The Draughtsman's Contract*

SIMON WATNEY

The financial and critical success of Peter Greenaway's latest film, *The Draughtsman's Contract*, has been accompanied by a general tendency to categorize and analyse it as a thriller. Thus, for example, Tony Rayns has noted how, 'like any good English Mystery thriller, *The Draughtsman's Contract* trades in deceptive appearances, secret motives and cold-blooded murders'¹. In a similar vein Helen Mackintosh describes it as 'a riddle about conspiracy and murder'². Undoubtedly the film encourages such an initial reading since, as Angela Carter has neatly observed, its 'plot is a combination of two characteristically British genres, the country house mystery and the comedy of manners. Agatha Christie articulated in terms of William Congreve'³. However, to leave off commentary at that point would be rather like qualifying *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a travelogue, or *Kiss Me Deadly* 'simply' as film noir. For, like them, *The Draughtsman's Contract* is fundamentally and essentially an allegory. And more than that, it is a film *about* allegory.

Set in a period which still conceived its world in allegorical terms, prior to the encroachments of rationalist or positivist thought, it is a film which encourages modern audiences to reflect on the profound changes in the history of European representation over the last three centuries, and their consequences for how we think ourselves and the world we share. Greenaway himself has described it as a 'figures-in-a-landscape movie...an opportunity for me to animate and celebrate the paintings of the seventeenth century and to re-invent an elaborate conversational language of conceit, pun, illusion and word-play that is, for better or worse, absent from contemporary speech'⁴. He

explains elsewhere that he chose to set his film in the England of the 1690's because 'of the new Protestantism of the English throne; because this was the moment when English painting was becoming indigenous: because the Whig landowners were about to start their massive building and property activity. Because these were the last years before the formal garden broke open under the impact of landscape gardening'. All these things 'made it a pivotal point for the games I wanted to play'⁵. In this article I want to consider some aspects of these 'games', and to trace their complex interplay within the film's use of landscape imagery. The actual plot, as such, will not concern me, except in its bearing on the central metaphor between the practices of draughtsmanship and of film-making, a metaphor concerning vision or, to add an important double-meaning, speculation.

Uninterested in what he regards as 'an English filmic obsession' with the 'chimera' of realism, Greenaway flaunts the conventions of 'period reconstruction' film-making. He deliberately introjects into his Restoration mise-en-scène a number of carefully chosen modernist themes in order precisely to problematize that seeming universality of 'human' experience which is assumed and constructed within the tradition of British 'historical' films. The authenticity of set, costume and dialogue to which the film ostensibly aspires is constantly undercut by the introduction of elements which undermine the very notion of authenticity itself. For this reason the film's greatest weakness lies in those occasional attempts to map out an allegory of contemporary Britain. Raymond Williams has characterized Restoration society in terms of the ways in which it 'reduced men and women to physical, bargainable carriers of estates and incomes'⁶. But the cynicism of Restoration comedy concerning the relation of marriage to property, is quite unlike the contemporary optimism of feminist consciousness and analysis. In *The Draughtsman's Contract* the women are revealed, ultimately, to have the upper hand. They finally 'play the game' more successfully than the men. But the game itself is not questioned. As an allegorical comparison then between the consolidation of two newly emergent ruling classes in late seventeenth and late twentieth century Britain the film is, I think, slight. But, as I have suggested, any such reading would depend on a relatively superficial reading of the film's literal plot, as a thriller. Its range of intertextual reference is not so much with other films as with other modes of representation, with theories of representation itself.

It is thus no accident, as Greenaway is the first to point

out 'that the central figure, the draughtsman, has in 1694 an optical device to help him fix his landscape on paper, a device which in principle, is little different from that used by the cameraman in 1982 to fix the landscape of *The Draughtsman's Contract* on the film'. This analogy is reinforced as he describes how 'the camera retains, like the draughtsman in the film, a steady, uncommitted, observant, critical eye...' Thus, he concludes, 'all events are open to interpretation and re-interpretation'⁷. This is the very nature of allegory — to demand further elucidation and commentary, beyond any closure of literal narrative devices. For allegory invariably proceeds from a radical distrust in 'mere' appearances. It conceives the world not as a stable set of coherent discrete objects, but rather as an endless network of resemblances and associations, in which signification is the *primary* order of things. Thus medieval and renaissance thought evaluated, in a simple example, the nut as an outward sign of its hidden kernel, permitting a host of analogies to be made between the body and soul, matter and spirit, object and significance. The world is scanned as a series of signs revealing

1. The camera retains, like the draughtsman in the film, a steady, uncommitted observant, critical eye...



the Divine Intention behind all things or, where such hermeneutic interpretation failed, the Satanic. The natural, or non-human world was thus perceived in a profoundly ambiguous manner. Most plants and animals can be folded into the symbolic structure of Christian thought, but what we think of as nature was regarded on the whole as a semiotic void, a meaningless domain, unthinkable, a vast absence against which the formal garden was pitted by analogy with Eden, a nature made meaningful by pattern and design.

Hence we may understand the elaborate geometrical Gardens of Love or Gardens of Vanity, or Youth, as they appear in renaissance culture, surrounded by high and sturdy walls within which their contents can alone possess meaning and value. It was the business of the gardener then to confer upon inchoate nature the signs of cultural and spiritual significance which they did not otherwise possess. By the seventeenth century this process had inevitably also incorporated the rhetoric of Antiquity, with all its complex values and meanings. However, by the time of the period in which *The Draughtsman's Contract* is 'set', the old allegorical culture which had sought to establish a system of resemblances between all things was already giving way to a new paradigm of thought which, on the contrary, was beginning to think its world in terms of differences rather than those systematic similarities which had previously served to 'prove' the essential semiotic coherence and order of the Christian universe. The signs of Divine presence were no longer required to actually resemble the deity, as in the example of the nutshell's relation to its kernel, or rind to its inner fruit.

For, as Michel Foucault has analysed in depth, this was the period in which we can trace the origins and emergence of the concept of Natural History, itself the precursor of modern biological and evolutionary theory⁸. Indeed, it is worth noting that when Sir Joshua Reynolds came to decorate the entrance hall of The Royal Academy a century later with an allegorical figure of Theory, he depicted her seated on clouds clutching a scroll inscribed with a single word Nature. In the Restoration period this alignment of Theory, in the form of the newly established Royal Society, and Nature, in the form of elaborate formal gardens, resulted in a wholly innovative attention to the natural world. Taxonomy was beginning to replace symbolism as the primary level of attention to plants and animals alike. The symbolic plants of the old allegorical garden were too soon to be categorized and classified in ways which released them from their overwhelming obli-

gation to analogically 'resemble' their Creator, and in this space between symbolism and science emerged the emblematic formal garden which plays so central a role in *The Draughtsman's Contract*, a garden in which the literary and the artistic, the visual and the verbal were united in the common rhetoric of statuary, obelisks, fountains, and so on.

At the same time analogies between landscape and the human mind were a commonplace of the seventeenth century thought, as witnessed in the poetry of Andrew Marvell and many others. The Restoration garden operated as an extended field for mental play, constructing and permitting a fixed narrative of literary associations, generally with religious and Classical reference points. The long-term business of 'establishing' such a garden was, of course, inseparable from the assumption of long-term residence and ownership. 'By the eighteenth century, nearly half of the cultivated land was owned by some five thousand families. As a central form of this predominance, four hundred families, in a population of some seven or eight million people, owned nearly a quarter of the cultivated land'.⁹ The private, enclosed, contemplative gardens of the pre-Civil War period were thus giving way to more elaborate forms of signifying relations to property and the 'countryside' as a whole. Beneath this lay the continuing if residual force of the older idea of the garden as a sign of Natural Order, legitimating social change well into our own times.

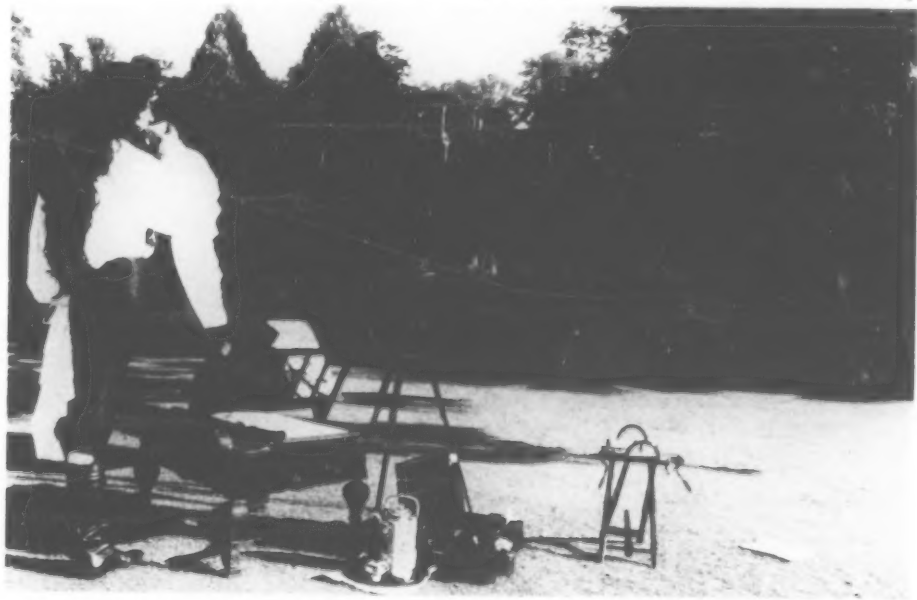
The Restoration garden therefore mediated a number of contemporary issues concerning the control of land, the idea of the Nation, the 'rights' of its new Caroline owners, and theories concerning the correspondence between garden design and moral philosophy. Thus a mid-century writer could observe how, 'when Speculation and practice, Art and Nature, are matched, they are pregnant and fruitful, but the one alone, wanting a mere helper, what fruits can it bring forth: Experience (as a philosopher said) is the Root of Art'¹⁰. The position of the viewing figure in the landscape is thus crucial, since the garden was expressly designed as an emblematic equivalent to his or her social standing. The emblematic garden, with its statues and inscriptions, its symbolic plants and its allegorical geometry of vistas and flower-beds offered itself as a confirmation of the 'right' to possession, a narrative of many-levelled connotations to be explored and deciphered at one's leisure. It was thus regarded as a kind of proposition in its own right, and as a model for social relations as a whole. Writing his stage directions to *The*

State of Innocence in the next century, Dryden required a Garden of Eden in the style of an ordinary Restoration garden as best representing what he regarded as 'an ordered and rational innocence'.¹¹

The late seventeenth century figure, standing in his or her garden, could thus scrutinize it from a number of related perspectives. There was no question of valuing nature as an end in itself. Always there was a chain of significations involved, leading the spectator from oblique references to the gardens of Antiquity to the Garden of Eden, referring directly to specific classical myths and equally directly to the emergent science of horticulture. Hence the significance of the pomegranate which the draughtsman presents to his employer, which we are clearly intended to relate to the celebrated image painted by the Dutch artist Danckert of the royal gardener, a certain Mr Rose, presenting King Charles with the first pineapple brought to fruition in England. In this context the entire formal plot of the film serves to reconstruct for us, in equivalent contemporary terms, this experience of 'reading' a garden. For the analogy of the whodunnit which Greenaway employs brilliantly encapsulates that work of detective, interrogative vision which was the everyday experience of the owner of a Restoration garden, paralleled in our times in the explorative gaze of the Private Eye or the forensic scientist.

Only from this perspective can we understand why

2. *The draughtsman, drawing the evidence that will eventually indict him for a murder he did not commit.*



Greenaway has introduced into his film a draughtsman whose drawings so engagingly flaunt all the conventions of seventeenth century draughtsmanship. Mr Neville has been employed to produce a series of twelve topographical drawings of that property which stands at the heart of the film. He approaches his task in a spirit which is literally unthinkable before the nineteenth century, in other words, the spirit of Naturalism which could value the appearance of the natural world directly as a self sufficient end in itself. His attitude in the film is criticised as being 'strictly material', and much is made of the fact that he only represents what he actually sees at one time and from one position. This is in flagrant contravention of the fact that such topographical drawings as were indeed frequently produced in this period were invariably constructed from a bird's-eye view, with emblematic figures of ownership and property paraded decoratively in the foreground.

The unfussy architectural drawings which he produces take on a formal narrative life of their own in the film as it becomes apparent that he is unwittingly reproducing in them a number of artefacts — shirts, a ladder, and so on — which will subsequently be used as evidence to indict him for a murder which he has not committed. He's being framed. There is thus an accumulative sense in which we also come to scrutinize these drawings with increasing interest as it becomes apparent to us what is actually going on.

We look at a couple of landscapes, and then begin to search actively for signs. This is the pictorial conceit which constitutes the central thrust of the film, and what is more it is completely independent of the actual plot which is a mere pretext to encourage this process of cumulatively active looking on our part as the audience. It is a device which Greenaway uses to brilliant effect in order to temporarily rid us of that very sense of the Picturesque which, a generation or so later, was to lead to the wholesale destruction of most of the emblematic gardens which were established in the Restoration period.

For the landscaped gardens of the eighteenth century would strip away all the elaborate parterres and emblematic devices of this kind of garden, introjecting into the seemingly 'natural' look of the rolling landscape those values of power and privilege which had previously been openly signified in the formal enclosed garden. We may detect this process 'on the horizon of history' in the strange person of the Genius of the Place figure, which haunts the film. By this notion of the Genius of the Place the

eighteenth century writer (and gardener) Pope had referred to what Capability Brown was to regard as a site's 'capabilities', its supposedly intrinsic capacity for transformation under his 'capable' control. Pope's *genius loci* was envisaged as a form of nature god to whom a given site is sacred, and by whom it might ultimately be reclaimed. This provided a rather playful justification for the wholesale demolition of the formal garden, as undertaken by Brown and others, for a rural gentry which no longer spoke Greek, and wished to signify its ascendancy in the more abstract terms of the generalized eighteenth century English landscape garden, purged of all direct symbolic or emblematic material, an idealised space which drew its appearance ultimately from the work of such painters as Poussin and Claude Lorraine, as allegory vanished from European art under the twin pressures of 'scientific' topography, and Romanticism. It is this immense amount of labour which is invested behind the appearance of the garden and the countryside as a whole which is also felt as a cumulative force throughout the film. There is always somebody at work on the landscape, just as the landscape itself is always at work, producing meanings and chains of association which ironically legitimate the social hierarchy of the land.

3. Power and privilege — introjecting into the seemingly natural look of the landscape.



Peter Greenaway has argued that the film 'is essentially about a draughtsman drawing a landscape, and the facets of the drawing and the landscape are compared on another level of representation, the film'. He wanted 'those three ideas to be present in the whole structure of the movie, so that one is aware that we are making comparisons all the time between the real landscape, Mr Neville's image of it and, ultimately, us as viewers seeing those ideas represented in film'¹². It is this concern with representation as such which marks the film's position within the tradition of British independent cinema. But at the same time the emphasis on the disinterestedness of the overall look of the film (including its highly problematic presentation of sexual violence) places it clearly within the discursive framework of modernism. Greenaway has stated tellingly that he 'was interested in the ways that either the drawings reflected or did not reflect what was in front of me. The question of whether the draughtsman draws what he sees or what he knows'¹³.

This distinction between 'seeing' and 'knowing' is as much a commonplace of modernist aesthetics as the garden/mind analogy was of the Restoration period, and both are to be found frequently in the dialogue as well as the look of the film. Braque's celebrated claim that he painted what he knew rather than what he saw has reverberated down the century as a rallying-cry for anti-naturalists of all persuasions in film as well as painting. The problem with this formulation however remains in its implicit reinforcement of the idea that there is such a thing in the first place as 'seeing' which can meaningfully be separated from the entire process of visual cognition. This assumption is itself a tenacious legacy from positivist thought, and needs to be questioned extremely hard. It is certainly an assumption which is entirely alien to seventeenth century thought, which was unable to distinguish in this fashion between material objects and our mental perceptions of them, a distinction which, as I have argued, is a basic defining tenet of positivism. Peter Greenaway's healthy distrust of reflection theories of cinematic, and by extension photographic meaning, remains one of the most encouraging resources in contemporary British cinema. Nonetheless, it seems strange to me that this semiotic distrust is couched in terms which owe more to Cezanne than to Saussure.

Notes

- 1 Tony Rayns on *The Draughtsman's Contract* in the BFI Press Dossier, London, BFI Production, 1982.

- 2 Helen Mackintosh on *The Draughtsman's Contract* in *City Limits*, No 70, February 4-10, 1983.
- 3 Angela Carter on *The Draughtsman's Contract* on the Channel Four programme *Visions* (December 1982).
- 4 Peter Greenaway in programme notes for the 1982 London Film Festival screening of *The Draughtsman's Contract*.
- 5 *ibid*
- 6 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, London Paladin, 1973, p69.
- 7 Peter Greenaway, *op cit*.
- 8 See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, London, Tavistock, 1970.
- 9 Raymond Williams, *op. cit.* p78.
- 10 Ralph Austen, 'The Spiritual Use of an Orchard', appendix to *A Treatise of Fruit Trees*, London, 1653.
- 11 John Dryden, *The State of Innocence*, Act 2 Scene 2.
- 12 Peter Greenaway, cited in Robert Brown, 'Greenaway's Contract', *Sight and Sound*, vol 51 no 1, Winter 1981 2 p35.
- 13 *ibid*, p38.

Note on contributors

Philip Hayward is a lecturer in Film and Television at West Surrey College of Art and Design, a member of the editorial boards of *Independent Media* and *Screen* magazines and author of a forthcoming book entitled *Video, Culture and The Media Industries*.

John Wyver is the producer for Illuminations, the independent television company which produced *State of the Art* and *Ghosts in the Machine* for Channel Four.

John Roberts is a freelance art critic and lecturer who has contributed to journals such as *Art Monthly*, *Artscribe* and *Screen*.

Steven Bode is a freelance writer, a member of the editorial board of *Independent Media* magazine and a columnist for *City Limits* magazine.

Griselda Pollock is senior lecturer in the University of Leeds Department of Fine Art, has contributed to a number of journals, and was co-author with Roszika Parker of *Old Mistresses* (London, RKP).

Julian Petley is a freelance writer on the media, a member of the editorial board of *Screen* magazine, a contributor to magazines such as *The Listener*, *Monthly Film Bulletin* and *Sight and Sound* and author of a study of German Cinema in the Thirties entitled *Capital and Culture* (BFI, London).

Diane Waldman is an Associate Professor in the University of Denver Department of Mass Communications and a contributor to a number of journals.

Marie Gillespie is a teacher in a London secondary school, a part-time lecturer for the University of London Centre for Extra-Mural Studies and a member of the editorial boards of *Independent Media* and *Initiatives* magazines.

Sylvia Hines works at Four Corners Film Workshop, is a part-time lecturer for the University of London Centre for Extra-Mural Studies, and is a regular contributor to *Independent Media* magazine.

Sylvia Paskin is a freelance lecturer and writer who has contributed to magazines such as *Monthly Film Bulletin*, *Independent Media* and *Women's Review*.

Andrea Rehberg is a post-graduate Philosophy student at Sussex University and has contributed to magazines such as *Independent Media* and *Textual Practice*.

Simon Watney lectured in Photography for a number of years at the Polytechnic of Central London, is a member of the editorial board of *Screen* magazine and is author of a study of how AIDS has been represented entitled *Policing Desire* (London, Methuen).

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All the videos marked with a dagger (†) are available for hire in Great Britain from London Video Arts — catalogue and further information from London Video Arts, 79 Frith Street, London W1V 5TS (telephone: 01-734 7410).

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PICTURE THIS: Media Representations of Visual Art & Artists

Edited by Philip Hayward

The last two decades have seen a proliferation of films, television programmes and videos about the Arts, but as of yet there has been little critical discussion about how the media have approached their subject. This anthology attempts to redress this by bringing together a collection of articles looking at how the media represent various aspects of the visual arts and artists involved in them.

Along with a number of specially commissioned articles addressing topics such as the history of Arts coverage on British TV, how the media represents feminist art and the impact of various Postmodern arts and media practices; the selection also reprints key critical pieces previously published in journals such as **Screen**, **Undercut** and **Wide Angle**.

Philip Hayward lectures in Film and Television at West Surrey College of Art and Design and is New Technologies Projects officer at the University of London Department of Extra-Mural Studies. He is a contributing member of the editorial boards of **Screen** and **Independent Media** magazines, has also written for journals such as **Block**, **Media, Culture and Society** and **Mediamatic** and is author of a forthcoming book entitled **Video, Culture and the Media Industries**.

JL John Libbey

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